

**Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Tradition*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York/Toronto, 2006. pp. 469. \$30.00 hc. ISBN 0-375-41317-0.**

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Readers of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* might recall how Dorothea's first husband, the Rev. Casaubon, devotes his entire life to a search for a comprehensive explanation of all beliefs of humankind. His magnum opus, a treatise called *The Key to All Mythologies*, is meant to show that all extant religions and philosophies are mere fragments of a coherent body of knowledge, a lost wisdom which ordinary mortals grasp only *in speculo et enigmatè*. Dorothea is initially awed by her husband's erudition, but eventually discovers, after Casaubon's demise, that the project had collapsed. All she is left with are fragments, which no amount of intellectual effort can marshal into a coherent whole.

George Eliot's indirect critique of all-encompassing belief systems reflected her personal disillusion with the claims of Christian theology and ethics, and indeed, Casaubon's failure might also be read as a warning to those intellectuals who in Eliot's time were becoming too easily enamored of the sweeping generalizations of continental (mainly Hegelian) philosophy. A century later, Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* voices concerns that are not too dissimilar from those of the Victorian novelist: at the deathbed of modernity, we inherit the ruins of earlier meta-narratives, relics of a shattered hybris which offer no guidance or consolation.

Beginning with the publication of her *History of God*, Karen Armstrong has gained an unparalleled position as an independent scholar of religion. Armstrong's undisputed erudition has not prevented her works from topping numerous bestseller lists, and in the wake of September 11 her intellectual impartiality has lent even greater weight to her calls for mutual understanding and tolerance. Reading the second installment of her autobiography, *The Spiral Staircase*, it is clear that Armstrong herself is the first to be surprised by such extraordinary success, which followed many years marked by illness and depression.

Her negative experiences as a member of a religious order and later as an aspiring academic have left her with a deep mistrust of religious and intellectual authoritarianism, which comes through in her self-definition as a “free-lance monotheist.” Reading Armstrong’s latest work, which carries the title *The Great Transformation*, one starts wondering, however, whether her penchant for synthesis and her search for an impartial point of view have not made her vulnerable to Casaubon’s temptation. Is Armstrong’s “great transformation” the “key to all mythologies” for a postmodern world?

In her introduction, Armstrong resorts to Jaspers’ notion of an “Axial Age” to denote the period between 900 BCE and 200 BCE, when “the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity” (xii) came into being. On the same page, Armstrong calls the Axial Age “one of the most seminal periods of intellectual, psychological, philosophical and religious change in recorded history,” noting that it was “the period of the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads, Mencius, and Euripides.” Indeed, even “Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” are categorized as “latter day flowerings of the Axial Age,” even if their beginning came centuries after the creative heyday that has given us the Pali canon, the Greek tragedies, or the Tao. Later on, we are told how “the consensus of the Axial Age is an eloquent testimony to the unanimity of the spiritual quest of the human race” (xiv), although we are reminded that “the Axial Age was not perfect,” mainly because of its “indifference to women” (xvi). Wherever a particular tradition stops emphasizing the importance of ethical norms and begins stressing the acceptance of obligatory doctrines, Armstrong views the shift as a sign that “the Axial Age [has] lost its momentum” (xiii).

Armstrong envisages the gradual discovery of interiority and the move away from tribalism and ritualism as the “great transformation” marking the Axial Age, though she is ready to admit that “the Axial peoples did not evolve in a uniform way” (xvii). Indeed, we are told that certain traditions “achieved an insight that was truly worthy of the Axial Age,” but eventually “retreated from it.” The people of India are said to have always been “on the vanguard of Axial progress”; in Israel,

the Axial ideal was achieved “by fits and starts”; in China, we see the traces of “incremental progress”; and the Greeks, from the very beginning, “went in an entirely different direction” from the other peoples. Virtually everything can be made to fit into the purview of the “Axial vision”; and indeed, when a definition is too broad, its usefulness sooner or later comes into question. Armstrong’s goal is to underscore the enduring relevance of many of the teachings that the great traditions have handed down to us; at the same time, to retrieve their authentic import, we must “bring the best insights of modernity to the table.” We are told that the outcome of our efforts will be a “recreation” of the “Axial vision,” but we are left in the dark as to what the latter will entail. One could actually argue that every major religious figure over the past twenty-five centuries tried to do exactly that, retrieving themes from his or her tradition to apply them to the issues of the day. Who are we to claim that “our” recreation will be more faithful to the “Axial spirit” than the previous re-appropriations and re-elaborations?

The readers of this work are invited to join Armstrong on a long intellectual cruise that takes them from the steppes of Northern India to the desert of Judea, and from the princely courts of ancient China to the acropolis in Athens. The text goes back and forth from one of the four “Axial peoples” to the next, seeking to underscore the points of contact between their religious experience and the ensuing theological speculation. The result, however, is only moderately satisfying. Admittedly, Armstrong wears her learning lightly; even those readers already familiar with the evolution of the Greek and the Hebrew mind will find much food for thought in her discussion of the Indian and especially the Chinese traditions, which probes behind the customary vague labels of “Hinduism,” “Buddhism,” or “Confucianism.” Some will argue that Armstrong’s readers enjoy a notable advantage over Casaubon’s long-suffering wife: the fragments of the puzzle are already pieced together for them. The question, however, is whether the resulting coherent narrative is an adequate portrayal of reality, or instead—and this appears increasingly likely as we read on—Armstrong’s Axial Age is a sort of a theological Procrustean bed, where the limbs of different traditions are broken by willful overstretching.

The first chapter explores the nature of religious practice *before* the onset of the “Axial Age”; this is then followed by eight chapters, which chart in a chronological fashion the parallel development of the four different traditions. The second section, for instance, is devoted to “ritual,” and charts the development of the four Axial people in the ninth century BCE, highlighting the extent to which later periods responded to this early emphasis on violent sacrifices. Armstrong explains the development of Greek myth and ritual sacrifices as a reaction to the violent collapse of Minoan or Mycenaean society, which might account for the widespread cult of “chthonian powers” (56) during the ensuing “dark age” (58); she contends however that during this early period of Greek civilization “there was no introspection” and “no attempt to analyze the hidden drama” that “haunted the Greek psyche” (61). The centrality of ritual in the development of the Hebrews’ religious consciousness is similarly underscored, and Armstrong presents the emergence of monotheism as the long-term consequence of the decision to worship one deity alone (69), thereby marking a rupture with earlier polytheistic practices. In India, the reform of Vedic ceremonial is associated with the discovery of interiority, as well as the gradual erasure of “agonistic practices” and violence from the religious arena (68–69). In China, ritual is closely associated with the running of the state; the correct performance of traditional rites by the legitimate monarch is seen as the guarantee of the smooth functioning of the natural order, as well as the long-term stability of the state.

The title of each section of the book indicates a common theme which supposedly characterizes every segment of the book; and indeed it often appears that the “Casaubon search” for a “theory of everything” affects not only the whole work, but also its individual sections. The third section, for instance, is titled “kenosis,” and sets out to explore how, in the eighth century BCE, “some were beginning to be critical of ritual and wanted a more ethically based religion.” The term used in *Philippians 2.7* to describe Christ’s self-emptying is deployed here to indicate the growing emphasis on interiority and ethics that characterized the “Axial peoples” at this time. One may wonder whether such use of the term is legitimate, since Armstrong detaches “kenosis”

entirely from its Christological context; in a later section, for instance, she is ready to tell us that Oedipus had to undergo “kenosis” in order to attain “true knowledge” (257). Here, the Hebrews undergo “kenosis” as the prophets urge them to examine their inner lives and abandon egotism (90), though “patriotic pride and chauvinistic theology” suppresses the prophetic call for conversion and leads the nation to self-destruction. Similarly, the decision of Indian renouncers (*sannyasins*) to forego the comforts of structured family life is implicitly construed as “kenotic.” But how is “kenosis” supposed to describe the Chinese situation of the time, where the constant infighting between different states resulted in a greater, rather than a lesser, focus on ritual? Similarly, while Armstrong finds an instance of “self-emptying sympathy” in Achilles’ dialogue with Priam (110–11), she has to admit that “the Greeks felt no need to develop new forms of religion but remained satisfied by the ancient cult.” The difference between the “Greek path” and that of the remaining “Axial peoples” is emphasized so often that one starts wondering whether their inclusion in this group is entirely justified.

Often, the way definite time periods are identified with a specific theme appears rather arbitrary. Armstrong views the seventh century BCE as a time characterized by a search for “knowledge,” though this was certainly not absent in the previous periods. The spirituality of the Upanishads, however, could have also been characterized as “kenotic”; and no rupture appears evident between the earlier Chinese tradition and the intricate family ceremonials emerging in China at the time. At the same time, the move to put religious law in writing and the ensuing composition of what would become the Five Books of Moses appears moved by different motives than the shift from *mythos* to *logos* which Armstrong reads behind the military reorganization of Greek city states. Are Josiah’s cultic reform and Sparta’s political ascendancy really indicative of a common shift in religious sensitivity?

Similar objections could be raised against every section of the book. In the sixth century BCE, the chosen common denominator is “suffering.” The exiled people of Israel begin to question the “neat, rationalistic God of the Deuteronomists” (172), and this “trauma of dislocation”

results in a new form of prophecy typified by Ezekiel. In Greece, this “suffering” is ascribed to the social crisis that gradually enveloped the different city states; as a result, some Greeks felt it necessary “to follow the promptings of *logos* to the bitter end” (189), and to develop an “entirely new rationalism” (188–89), which certainly would not have been out of place in the chapter on “knowledge.” Indeed, it is to fight “ignorance” (193) that new meditation techniques are developed in India at the same time as Ezekiel has his vision of the Holy of Holies. One also wonders in what way “empathy” can be distinguished from “concern for everybody.” Armstrong’s reflections on Greek tragedy (226–32) are poignant and insightful, but one wonders whether Sophocles and Aeschylus were truly responding to the same “spiritual vacuum” (232) behind the Indian schools of Gosala and Mahavira.

In Israel, we are told, the Axial Age came to a close at an earlier stage than among the other Axial peoples, but Armstrong insists that “Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam” (248) are effectively a “second flowering” of the Axial “concern for everybody.” In Greece, it was left to Socrates to enlighten the youth as to the nature of goodness. Chapter seven goes on to discuss the emergence of Buddhism, rehearsing themes and arguments which were also developed in Armstrong’s earlier biography of the Buddha. This is one of the most interesting sections of the work, and it is quite enlightening to read about Gautama’s experience in the context of similar quests in India and China.

The discussion of Plato and Aristotle in the following section, however, is more problematic. Armstrong tells us that at the beginning of his career, Plato’s actions had been characterized by tolerance and an unflinching devotion to the truth, whereas later, his vision “had soured” and had become “coercive, intolerant, and punitive,” making his religion “wholly intellectual” (325). This is at best an overstatement and at worst a distortion of Plato’s views, and Armstrong fails to support it with adequate textual evidence. We are then told that the Axial Age in Greece would make “marvelous contributions to mathematics, dialectics, medicine and science,” but it was already “moving away from spirituality.” Hellenistic philosophy, or Neo-Platonic mysticism, are apparently beyond the pale. But this section abounds with surprises.

We are told that Aristotle saw God as the Unmoved Mover (328)—a statement which needs a far more careful contextualization than the one Armstrong gives. Her sympathies are, however, often unfathomable. On one hand we are told that Aristotle had “a better understanding of traditional spirituality than Plato” (329) and was “more comfortable with emotions” than his master. A few lines below, however, Armstrong laments that “unfortunately,” Aristotle “made an indelible impression on Western Christianity” (330). Value-judgments of this sort abound throughout the work, and of course readers are expected to concur, though counterarguments are never considered.

By the time we reach the last section, we are so inured to generalizations as to be no longer surprised by such statements as, “The spiritual revolution of the Axial Age had occurred against a backcloth of turmoil, migration, and conquest” (366). Given that the age in question lasted for seven hundred years, one wonders which historical period of the same length could not be characterized by an identical statement. We are also introduced to Rabbinic Judaism (which also includes Christianity), as well as Islam, whose founder, the prophet Muhammad, “had never heard of the Axial Age,” though “he would have probably understood the concept” (385). Indeed, it is rather doubtful that Lao Tzu, Socrates, or any of the other thinkers reviewed in this book were closely acquainted with Karl Jaspers either. Armstrong’s marathon closes with an appeal to mutual understanding and tolerance “in a tragic world, where, as the Greeks knew, there can be no simple answers” (399).

At the end of this work, I found myself wondering, What is the intended audience of this book? Scholars of religion are unlikely to turn to Armstrong to deepen their understanding of history and theology, and her penchant for emphasizing what often are rather tenuous points of contact between different traditions will alienate the more academically-minded. On the other hand, readers with little previous exposure to the history of religion might find themselves utterly lost in this labyrinth of names and teachings, and, as we saw, the Ariadne’s woof of “Axial Age spirituality” is all too easily cut. Armstrong’s project suffers from its excessive scope. She seemed to fare much better in her earlier *History of God*: her grasp of the material was stronger, and the

overarching methodological template did not force her into intellectual sleights of hand. This is not to say that there is not much of value in this work, but perhaps, as George Eliot seemed to say over a hundred years ago, all we can truly know are fragments. Anything beyond that is hybris.