



“Axial” by Another Name

The Great Transformation

Karen Armstrong

Atlantic Books, London, 2006

\$39.99 from Epworth Books

Copernicus, many years ago now, enabled us to stand back and see that Earth is not in fact the centre of everything, but a modest part of a much larger solar system. Karen Armstrong, in her recent book “The Great Transformation” has done the same thing for me where the world’s religions are concerned.

For quite a few years now, I have become more and more critical of the Church and its dogmas, both as I have known them personally, and of what I have read of them the past. The gap I have seen between Christianity and the life and teaching of Jesus has grown ever wider. But after reading this book, I see that I continued, to a large extent, to use Jesus as the yardstick by which to evaluate such people as the Buddha or Confucius. Karen Armstrong here presents these figures, and many others from the period of roughly the thousand years before the Common Era, in a panorama of the development of human self-awareness and an understanding of our relationship to the context in which we live. So I will never again be able to assume that either Jesus or Christianity is the centre around which the whole religious universe revolves.

Her story begins with Aryan people of the steppes of Southern Russia about 3,500 years ago — people living a quiet sedentary existence who “experienced an invisible force within themselves and in everything they said, heard and touched”. Over time they came to see the immediate sensory world as a counterpart, or manifestation of, a spirit world. So they saw it as appropriate to offer sacrifices to their gods, “to replenish the energies they expended in maintaining world order”. Some such world view as this was standard throughout Europe, the Middle East and Asia at the time.

Then, between about 900 and 200 BC, a series of thinkers challenged almost everything in this way of seeing things, and pioneered a new understanding. They saw a person’s relationship and responsibility to all living things and [especially] to other people in a new way — one that was essentially inward, personal and ethical. Usually, violence and aggression of all kinds were no longer praised, but condemned. If there was to be a place for sacrifice, it must be a self-offering. Communities did not always consistently put these ideals into practice and, across a culture, the extent of even acknowledging them often fluctuated. But over this period, and over all the cultures from Greece to China, the change Karen Armstrong describes and documents, in self-awareness and in how humans could best relate to what is beyond themselves, was remarkable — her word “transformation” is not too strong.

New stages in these developments often appeared first in India or China, so quite a lot of space is devoted to spiritual pioneers in India prior to Hinduism, in China before and after Confucius, and to the Buddha. Although prophets like Amos and Hosea were leaders in arguing for a moral god, the Jews are presented as in some ways late developers. Yahweh, for example, was still perceived as a markedly warlike god when leaders in India and China had been renouncing war for centuries. What developed in Greece was not so much a deeper or more personal spirituality, but rather a new capacity for thinking logically and dispassionately. Seeing Plato and Aristotle sketched in on this very large canvas cut my perception of them down to what I'm now sure is a more appropriate size.

Jesus doesn't strictly belong in the period covered, but, along with Mohammed, is dealt with briefly at the end. Karen Armstrong sets him not only in this large landscape, but more immediately in the context of contemporary rabbis, and St Paul, who very substantially repackaged Jesus for Gentile consumption. Seeing Jesus portrayed in this dispassionate and even-handed way, has thrown a fascinating new light for me on things that have long been familiar.

I now see a certain irony, then, in the fact that the culture in which the development of science, technology and an aggressive capitalism has taken place, has been so dependent on Plato and St Paul, and more generally, on two cultures [Greek and Judaic], which tended to lag behind the most significant human developments in the millennium before the Common Era.

I have one or two reservations or queries. In particular, I wonder whether Karen Armstrong is too sympathetic to those, over the centuries, who have renounced marriage, family and active involvement in society, in favour of meditation in some degree of isolation. She hasn't dislodged me from the view that being fully human — and most richly spiritual — means being as actively involved as possible in life and in community. I'm in no position to predict how well her overall picture will stand up to inspection by other scholars, but I find it so coherent and convincing I will be surprised if it is radically altered.

Just because her scope is already so wide, I'm sorry there is no mention of the peoples of Africa and the Americas — although it may well be that there are no records to make that possible. And I find it a little frustrating that she stops in time where she does. I hope I live to read a similar overview from her that continues through the two millennia we call the Common Era.

At 400 pages, it's a substantial book in every sense, and a mind-stretching one. But Karen Armstrong's easy style kept me wanting to know what came next. Unavoidably, there are some technical terms, but there is an excellent glossary - in addition to the thorough references, bibliography and index. I would guess it may become a standard University text, but it is a straight-forward and fascinating read for anyone who wants a better understanding of what it means to be human, and of how we, the human race, got to where we are now.

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