

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



NUMBER 177 - JULY 2007

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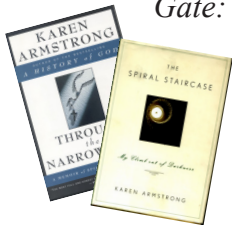
A time that changed the world

If you could choose a group of people to advise our president regularly about how to deal with the current conflicts in the U.S., in Iraq, and elsewhere in the world, who would you choose? I wish Karen Armstrong were in such a group. She has amazingly thorough knowledge and understanding of the world's religions, their history, and the cultures in which they're set. Our leaders don't seem to have this understanding. They urgently need it, I feel, because of the role religions are now playing in our own nation and in the wider world.



Armstrong is a former nun who is the author of numerous books and several TV documentaries. To learn more about her unusual and fascinating life, I recommend her two memoirs, *Through the Narrow*

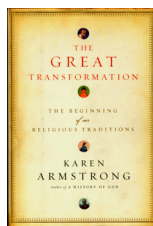
Gate: A Memoir of Spiritual Discovery (St. Martin's, 1981) and *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness* (Knopf, 2005). Some of her other books are tough reading, but these two aren't.



A new kind of human experience

Her book *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (Knopf, 2006) is about the time when, she says, "the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity came into being: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece."

"During this period of intense creativity," Armstrong observes, "spiritual and philosophical geniuses pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience. ... They show us what a human being should be."



Putting our religion in perspective

Books that present all the world's major religions help us put our own religion in perspective. They make us step back and look at the larger picture instead of mistakenly seeing ourselves as the center of everything and the only ones with the truth. Getting that perspective is very important.



Many Christians believe that Christianity is the only route to God and that Jesus was divine in a way that no one else is or ever has been, but I don't see how that could be true. And I find it strange that the Christians who see it as true cite Bible verses as proof. Anyone who didn't see Christianity as the only source of truth, it seems to me, wouldn't see the



Bible's claims about itself as proof. To be convincing for non-Christians, evidence of Christianity's unique validity would have to come from outside sources.

Valid advice from many sources

To me, the evidence from those sources shows that Christianity has no monopoly on truth. Instead, as books like Armstrong's remind us, the other major religions also give valid advice about how to experience the sacred—what we call God. The others also offer valid and very similar advice about how to treat other people in order to promote the good of all. I suspect those are the essentials in any religion. Other beliefs, such as beliefs about what happens after death, can't be verified. As for the religions' specific religious practices and terminology, they all seem to reflect mainly the cultures in which the religions arose.



In reading Armstrong's book I was a bit jolted by finding Moses, Isaiah, and David given only a few pages in the midst of several hundred pages describing Chinese, Indian, and Greek sages, some of whom I'd never even heard of. It was rather startling not to see Jesus and Paul discussed until about page 380 of Armstrong's 400-page account. But while I suspect that some Christians would reject her book for that reason, it's part of why I found the book fascinating and immensely helpful.

The Axial Age—a pivotal period

The Great Transformation describes the period from about 900 to 200 B.C.E., which German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age because it was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity. Armstrong finds that more recent scholarship has revised some of Jaspers' dating and that precise dating of some of the movements he described is virtually impossible. However, she strongly believes that the general development of the Axial Age gives us some extremely important insights. Both Christianity and Islam arose as religions after the Axial Age, but their roots were in it, so learning about it can help us understand our own religion and today's religion-based conflicts.



Because Armstrong's book is so packed with detail, it can be tough reading, especially for anyone who, like me, is not an avid reader of history, but it's worth the effort. The book contains far too much information to even summarize here, but I believe every Christian could benefit from seeing the overall picture it presents. I'm therefore offering a look at that, from its introduction and final chapter.

Shocking insights for religious people

In Karen Armstrong's view, we have never surpassed the insights of the Axial Age, even though its sages lived in conditions that in some ways were very different from our current condition. She finds that "the prophets, mystics, philosophers, and poets of the Axial Age were so advanced and their vision was so radical that later generations tended to dilute it. In the process, they often produced exactly the kind of religiosity that the Axial reformers wanted to get rid of."



Armstrong believes that has happened in the modern world. We've diluted our religions' most valuable insights, which she finds are very similar in all the major religions, and replaced them with a kind of religiosity that too often harms rather than helps. Therefore "the Axial sages have an important message for our time, but their insights will be surprising—even shocking—to many who consider themselves religious today."

The correct attitude—reverent silence

For the Axial Age sages, Armstrong explains, "what mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level." The traditions developed during this period "pushed forward the frontiers of human consciousness and discovered a transcendental dimension in the core of their being, but they did not necessarily regard this as supernatural, and most of them refused to discuss it." Most Axial Age philosophers, says Armstrong, had no interest whatever in doctrine or metaphysics. The only correct attitude, they felt, was reverent silence.



These sages did not seek to impose their own view of ultimate reality on other people, Armstrong finds. They believed no one should ever accept any second-hand religious teaching about faith. Questioning everything was essential. So was testing all teaching against one's personal experience.

We find God through compassion

Before the Axial Age, Armstrong tells us, ritual and animal sacrifice had been central to the religious quest. The Axial sages still valued ritual but gave it new ethical significance. They put morality at the heart of the spiritual life, and to them, morality meant compassion. It was the route to the divine. "The only way you could encounter what they called 'God,' 'Nirvana,' 'Brahman,' or the 'Way' was to live a compassionate life. Indeed, religion *was* compassion."



Armstrong observes that we tend to think that before undertaking a religious lifestyle we must prove to our own satisfaction that "God" or the "Absolute" exists. But in the view of the Axial sages, "first you must commit yourself to the ethical life; then disciplined and habitual benevolence, not metaphysical conviction, would give you intimations of the transcendence you sought. This meant that you had to be ready to change."

Concern for the whole world

Nearly all the Axial sages, Karen Armstrong points out, realized that you could not confine your

benevolence to your own people. Each tradition developed its own formulation of the Golden Rule: do not do to others what you would not have done to you. “As far as the Axial sages were concerned, respect for the sacred rights of all beings—not orthodox belief—was religion. If people behaved with kindness and generosity to their fellows, they could save the world.”



Armstrong finds that each of the major religious traditions developed in societies that, like ours, were torn apart by violence. “The first catalyst of religious change,” she sees, “was usually a principled rejection of the aggression that the sages witnessed all around them.” A big factor in their rejection of aggression was their starting to look for the causes of violence within themselves. They penetrated their interior world and began exploring a previously undiscovered realm of human experience.

Unanimity in the spiritual quest

Karen Armstrong finds that the consensus of the Axial Age is eloquent testimony to the unanimity of the spiritual quest of the human race. “The Axial peoples,” she emphasizes, “all found that the com-



passionate ethic worked. All the great traditions that were created at this time are in agreement about the supreme importance of charity and benevolence, and this tells us something important

about our humanity. To find that our own faith is so deeply in accord with others is an affirming experience. Without departing from our own tradition, therefore, we can learn from others how to enhance our particular pursuit of the empathic life.”

Armstrong recognizes that the Axial Age wasn't perfect. One of its major failings that she acknowledges was its indifference to women. Therefore “we cannot follow the Axial reformers slavishly; indeed, to do so would fundamentally violate the spirit of the Axial Age, which insisted that this kind of conformity trapped people in an inferior and immature version of themselves. What we can do is extend the Axial ideal of universal concern to everybody, including the female sex. When we try to re-create the Axial vision, we must bring the best insights of modernity to the table.”



Despite the Axial faiths' failure to measure up to their high ideals, says Karen Armstrong, at their core they share an ideal of sympathy, respect, and universal concern. “The fact that they all came up with such profoundly similar solutions by so many different routes,” she writes, “suggests that they had indeed discovered something important about the



way human beings worked. Regardless of their theological ‘beliefs’—which did not much concern the sages—they all concluded that if people made a disciplined effort to reeducate themselves, they would experience an enhancement of their humanity. In one way or another, their programs were designed to eradicate the egotism that is largely responsible for our violence, and promoted the empathic spirituality of the Golden Rule. This, they found, introduced people to a different dimension of human experience.”

The test of true religiosity

Armstrong doesn't claim that all theology should be scrapped or that Christian beliefs are wrong. She recognizes that dogmas often express profound spiri-

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 14 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

tual truth. However, she emphasizes that whatever religion our beliefs come from, “they cannot express the entire truth. A transcendent value is one that, of its very nature, cannot be defined.” A principle at the heart of the Axial Age, notes Armstrong, is that any statement about God should have two qualities. It must remind us that the divine cannot fit into our limited human categories, and it must lead us to silence. It should not try to answer all our questions but rather should reduce us to speechless awe.



The Axial sages give us two important pieces of advice, Karen Armstrong observes. First, instead of

simply lambasting the “other side,” we must examine our own behavior. Second, we must take practical, effective action. “If people’s beliefs—secular or religious—make them belligerent, intolerant, and unkind about other people’s faith, they are not ‘skillful’ [Buddhism’s word]. If, however, their convictions impel them to act compassionately and honor the stranger, then they are good, helpful, and sound. This is the test of true religiosity in every single one of the major traditions.”

Are we putting our Christian religiosity to that test today? Not often enough.

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July 2007

In her book *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong mentions these insights that emerged from the major religions during the Axial Age.

- √ Questioning beliefs and testing them against experience is essential.
- √ What matters most is how one behaves, not what one claims to believe.
- √ No statement about the divine can fully define it.
- √ The appropriate attitude toward the sacred is reverent silence.
- √ Being moral means being compassionate, not just to one’s own people but also to the stranger.

√ Being compassionate and rejecting aggression is the route to the divine and to profound personal change.

√ Examining one’s own behavior is more important than lambasting others’ behavior. Beliefs that make one belligerent, intolerant, and cruel are not sound.

What if more Christians put more emphasis on these today? Wouldn’t it benefit both the church and the world?

