



The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions

By Karen Armstrong

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From Karen Armstrong, the bestselling author of *A History of God* and *The Spiral Staircase*, comes this extraordinary investigation of a critical moment in the evolution of religious thought.

In the ninth century BCE, events in four regions of the civilized world led to the rise of religious traditions that have endured to the present day—development of Confucianism and Daoism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, monotheism in Israel, and philosophical rationalism in Greece. Armstrong, one of our most prominent religious scholars, examines how these traditions began in response to the violence of their time. Studying figures as diverse as the Buddha and Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah, Armstrong reveals how these still enduring philosophies can help address our contemporary problems.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

It's not what one may expect from a book about the development of the world's religions: "Crouched in his mother's womb, he lay in wait for his father, armed with a sickle, and the next time Uranus penetrated Gaia, he cut off his genitals and threw them to the earth." However, the Greek myth of Cronus clearly illustrates Armstrong's main thesis, that the "simultaneous" development of the world's religions during what Karl Jung called the axial age, is a direct result of the violence and chaos, both physical and spiritual, of past civilizations. Armstrong, a former nun turned self-described "freelance monotheist," has enough background and personal investment in the material to make it come alive. Her delivery is crystal clear, informative and, though somewhat academic, easy for the layman to understand. Her voice is straightforward yet wrought with palpable concern. This reinforces the book's goals of creating a clear understanding of where religious developments have come from and explaining how today's "violence of an unprecedented scale" parallels the activities that created the "axial age" in the first place.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

If you've already written God's biography (*A History of God*), surely it's a cakewalk to tackle the era before His ascendancy in theological affairs. But making sense of four disparate cultures and religious traditions in the space of 400 pages proves to be a risky proposition for Armstrong. Critics agree that her central theme, "the gradual elimination of violence from religion" (*New York Times*), makes for compelling reading, as does her weaving together of similarities among disparate faiths. Though her analysis shines, many reviewers feel the book suffers from too broad a focus; centuries are foreshortened, and even her supporters feel her conclusion doesn't do the book justice. With classic titles like *The Battle for God* and *Islam: A Short History* in her bibliography, the "runaway nun" remains our preeminent writer on popular religion, but this tome might best be reserved for her hardcore followers.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review The foremost English-language historian of religion today, whose *A History of God* (1993) has become the standard popular work on the great monotheisms, expands upon German philosopher Karl Jaspers' characterization of the long period preceding the rise of Rome--900 to 200 B.C.E.--as the Axial Age. That at first puzzling geometric metaphor crystallizes Jaspers' sense, which Armstrong clearly shares, of that immense era as pivotal in human consciousness. During it the major religious traditions began and refined the moral attitudes they manifest to this day. Commencing as tribal and aristocratic, the pre-Christian religions became personal and democratic as the realm of divinity came to be perceived as transcendent. Most important was the development of nonviolence as a holy ideal, not least because the early religions initially employed violence in their rituals and justified violence by their adherents. The Aryans of northern India and the Chinese, both initially violent, attempted to constrain belligerence and avert chaos by fashioning what became Hinduism and Buddhism, and Confucianism and Taoism, respectively. Meanwhile, the smaller civilizational formations of the Jews and the Greeks responded to experiences of, respectively, periodic near-obliteration and social collapse with monotheism and philosophical rationalism, respectively. Armstrong tells this huge story in 10 chapters that each relate historically parallel developments among the Indians, Chinese, Greeks, and Jews. Magisterially but companionably, she unfolds the successive movements that molded religious consciousness in each nation, explaining them with such clarity that this book ranks with *A History of God* as one of her finest achievements and an utterly enthralling reading experience. *Ray*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Thomas Kelly:

Do you have favorite book? When you have, what is your favorite's book? E-book is very important thing for us to understand everything in the world. Each guide has different aim as well as goal; it means that publication has different type. Some people sense enjoy to spend their the perfect time to read a book. They are really reading whatever they take because their hobby is actually reading a book. How about the person who don't like reading through a book? Sometime, particular person feel need book when they found difficult problem as well as exercise. Well, probably you will want this The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions.

Edward Foland:

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Johnny Harper:

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certainly one of it. This great information can certainly drawn you into brand-new stage of crucial imagining.

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