

The Great Transformation - The World in the time of Buddha, Socrates,
Confucius and Jeremiah by Karen Armstrong.
Atlantic Books 2006.

Karen Armstrong's literary output is prodigious, and the fact that each book mirrors the high quality of its predecessor is eloquent testimony to her scholarship and great talent for putting across complex ideas and complicated events in a way that is both interesting and informative to non-specialists.

The Great Transformation, a subject to which Armstrong devoted a chapter in her excellent *A Short History of Myth* for Canongate, describes the extraordinary developments in religion and religious philosophy in the period between 900 and 300 BCE, a period named the Axial Age by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers.

The Great Transformation is divided into ten chapters of which the first is a historical survey of the Axial age and its peoples before the rest analyse the development of specific modes of thought over the 700 odd years that comprise the period. Armstrong considers the appearance of all the great religious philosophies of the time, especially Buddhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Jainism, as well as the historical events and developments that at times influenced, or were influenced by the religious trends in question.

The Great Transformation may be a book that attracts those who already have a toe in the water of the period through their involvement with one of its faiths - in which case they will find areas of great fascination about which they may have been relatively ignorant, as I did with the plentiful material on China. But the book deserves to be much more widely read because, as Armstrong points out in her final chapter, much of the religious philosophy of the Axial Age has enjoyed a durability and unparalleled influence in the world, even through to modern times. For Karen Armstrong the hallmark of the period was its promotion of self-criticism and the need for a razor sharp honesty, two qualities which are all too often absent from internal religious debate and inter-faith relationships, and the message which I derived from the book was that we may have less time than we think if we do not strive to reclaim them, together with the best of the rest that the Axial Age promoted.

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