

## The Axial Age Thesis: A Critical Evaluation of Karen Armstrong's Interpretation of Religious Transformation

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### Abstract

This article provides a critical evaluation of "The Great Transformation" by Karen Armstrong, focusing on her interpretation of the Axial Age (900-200) as a pivotal breakthrough in the history of religious consciousness. Grounded in the original concept proposed by Karl Jaspers, in his "The Origin and Goal of History" Armstrong argues that this period between witnessed profound ethical, spiritual, and philosophical transformations across ancient civilizations. By applying the qualitative textual and historiographical method, this study examines both the strengths and limitations of Armstrong's thesis, particularly her emphasis on compassion, ethical universalism, inward spirituality, and interreligious relevance in the modern world. The article further explores the significance of Axial Age thought for contemporary Religious Studies, comparative religion, ethics, interfaith dialogue, and global civilization. While acknowledging the inspirational and interdisciplinary contributions of Armstrong's work, the study also addresses important methodological and historical criticisms related to universality, historical precision, and interpretive generalization.

**Keywords:** Axial Age, Karen Armstrong, Karl Jaspers, Comparative Religion, Compassion, Religious Transformation, Interfaith Dialogue

### Introduction

Religion has a very broader and wider scope and meaning in its boundaries and there is no one single definition that can covers or encompass it's all dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Numerous religious scholars, historians, and researchers have defined religion by their own way and thoughts; however, it can be understood as a system of ritual practices, beliefs, and the values related to both nature and the universe that also includes one or more supernatural and divine entities. It also includes the nature of good and evil, moral and ethical principles, worships, prayers, meaning and purpose of life, <sup>2</sup>etc. The study of religion has increasingly moved beyond confessional boundaries toward comparative, ethical, and interdisciplinary approaches.

Within this intellectual context, Karen Armstrong<sup>3</sup> has emerged as one of the most influential contemporary interpreters of religion, spirituality, and interfaith understanding. Her influential work, *The Great Transformation*,

<sup>1</sup> Joanna Malone, & Anna Dadswell (2018). The Role of religion, spirituality and /or belief in positive aging for older adults. *Geriatrics*, 2018, 3(2) 28.

<sup>2</sup> Liyana Pathirana, N., & Akroyd, C. (2023). Religiosity and accountants' ethical decision-making in a religious country with a high level of corruption. *Pacific Accounting Review*, 35(2), 181-198.

<sup>3</sup> **Karen Armstrong, OBE, FRSL (b. 1944)** is a British scholar, former Roman Catholic nun, and leading international commentator on comparative religion. Educated at St Anne's College, Oxford, she has published over twenty works on Abrahamic faiths and world traditions, including *A History of God* (1993) and *The Great Transformation* (2006). In 2008, she received the TED Prize and founded the international *Charter for Compassion*. For a complete biographical overview, see "Karen Armstrong," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karen-Armstrong>.

revisits the concept of the “Axial Age,” originally proposed by Karl Jaspers, and presents it as a defining moment in humanity’s spiritual and ethical development. The term axial age refers to an epoch in the history of human that is commonly regarded as a decisive time in human cognition, and according to Jasper this age held from 800 to 200 BCE which saw the rise period of Confucius, Lao-tse in China, the foundation of Buddhism, and its foundational authorship of Hinduism, the Hebrew prophets in Palestine, Hellenic philosophers, Zoroaster in Iran, historian and poets in Greece<sup>5</sup>. According to Armstrong, between roughly 900 BCE and 200 BCE,<sup>6</sup> civilizations across China, India, Greece, and the Near East experienced parallel religious and philosophical breakthroughs that transformed human consciousness from mythological and ritual-centered systems toward ethical reflection, compassion, and inward spirituality. This article critically evaluates Armstrong’s Axial Age thesis by examining its historical foundations, central arguments, ethical implications, and contemporary relevance. It also explores the significance of her thought for Religious Studies faculty engaged in Comparative Religions, Theology, Ethics, Interfaith Harmony, Orientalism, and Islam and the West.

### **Karl Jaspers and the Concept of the Axial Age**

The term “Axial Age” (*Achsenzeit*) was first introduced by Karl Jaspers in his book *The Origin and Goal of History* first published in 1949. With its publication, the statement received a very broader exposure around the globe. By the time and particularly with the rise of 1950 it got published in number of copies in different languages. With the passage of time in late 1970 the term Axial was widely accepted and numerous books, articles and publications appeared with the notion of Axial Age as we see a wider appeal in the writings of (Fikentscher 1975; Plott 1977 Engster 1983; Peiser 1993);<sup>7</sup> Jaspers used the term in the context of his philosophy of history to describe a decisive turning point in human intellectual and spiritual development occurring roughly between 900 BCE and 200 BCE. Jaspers argued that during this period several geographically disconnected civilizations independently produced extraordinary thinkers whose ideas permanently shaped world civilization. These included:

- Confucius and Laozi in China,
- the Buddha and Upanishadic sages in India,
- Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato,
- and the Hebrew prophets in Israel.

For Jaspers, this era constituted the spiritual “axis” of history because humanity became newly conscious of itself, morality, transcendence, and universal ethical responsibility.

### **Karen Armstrong’s Interpretation of the Axial Age**

Armstrong develops Jaspers’ concept further by emphasizing the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the Axial transformation. According to

her thesis, the Axial Age marked humanity’s movement:

- from ritual to ethics,
- from tribalism to universalism,
- from external sacrifice to inward spirituality,
- and from mythological conformity to moral self-awareness.

[She argues that the traditions born during this era continue to shape modern civilization and remain highly relevant for addressing contemporary crises. ] need to dig deep

A central aspect of Armstrong’s argument is that Axial thinkers emerged during periods of intense political instability, warfare, social fragmentation, and existential anxiety. Their teachings therefore represented moral and spiritual responses to suffering and violence rather than abstract theological speculation.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Ethical Revolution of the Axial Age**

One of Armstrong’s most important contributions lies in her interpretation of the Axial Age as an ethical revolution. She argues that religious consciousness increasingly emphasized:

- compassion,

<sup>4</sup> Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) a renowned German philosopher.

<sup>5</sup> Jaspers, K. (1953 [1949]). *The origin and goal of history*. Translated by M. Bullock. London: Routledge & Paul. Jaspers 1953, p. 6

<sup>6</sup> The Axial Age Thesis Pp 07, Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London, 1953), p. 10-20.

<sup>7</sup> Inventing the axial age: the origins and uses of a historical concept John D. Boy & John Torpey, *Theor Soc* (2013) 42:241–259 DOI 10.1007/s11186-013-9193-0, Published online: 24 March 2013 # Springer Science Business Media Dordrecht 2013

<sup>8</sup> The Axial Age Thesis Pp 406

- justice,
- self-discipline,
- empathy,
- and moral responsibility.

The emergence of the “Golden Rule” across multiple traditions reflects this universal ethical shift.

According to Armstrong, authentic religion should not be measured primarily through ritual performance or doctrinal rigidity but through its capacity to produce compassionate and morally responsible human beings.

This interpretation significantly contributes to contemporary discussions on:

- interfaith harmony,
- comparative ethics,
- peacebuilding,
- and global citizenship.

### Christianity and Islam as Post-Axial Religions

Armstrong interprets Christianity and Islam as “post-Axial” universal religions that inherited and expanded Axial ethical ideals. She argues that both traditions continued the Axial emphasis on:

- ethical universalism,
- compassion,
- justice,
- and transcendental moral responsibility.

This perspective is particularly valuable for contemporary discourse on Islam and the West, interreligious dialogue, and comparative theology. The importance of world religions and their respect for each other have become so obvious that there is no peace, harmony without accepting each other's equal rights. Hans Kung writes: “*No survival without a world ethic. No world peace without peace between religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions*”<sup>10</sup>. Armstrong's interpretation challenges exclusivist and confrontational approaches to religion by emphasizing shared moral and spiritual foundations across traditions.

### Contemporary Relevance of the Axial Age

A major strength of Armstrong's work is its contemporary relevance. She argues that modern humanity possesses unprecedented technological power but suffers from moral fragmentation, violence, intolerance, and spiritual emptiness.

Her response is not a return to premodern religiosity but a rediscovery of Axial values:

- compassion,
- empathy,
- ethical responsibility,
- and the ability to understand the perspective of others.

In her concluding reflections, at the end of the book, Armstrong writes: “If religion is to bring light to our broken world, we need, as Mencius suggested, to go in search of the lost heart, the spirit of the compassion, that lies at the core of all our traditions”.<sup>11</sup>

The distinctiveness of Christian ethics and its global appealing is due to its inspiration, motivation<sup>12</sup>, human dignity and love without any discriminations.

This ethical vision explains why Armstrong's work remains influential in discussions concerning religious extremism, interfaith conflict, and global ethics.

### Significance for Religious Studies

The study of the Axial Age has profound implications for faculty and scholars working in:

- Comparative Religion,
- Theology,

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<sup>9</sup> The Axial Age Thesis Pp 08

<sup>10</sup> Hans Kung, Global Responsibility, in search of a new world ethic, London SCM Press 1991, P,xv

<sup>11</sup> Karen Armstrong, The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions, Anchor Books, 2006, Page: 449 (eBook)

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, Ethics in the World Religions, One World Publications, Oxford, 2001, Vol, iii, P. 322

- Ethics,
- Interfaith Harmony,
- History of Religion,
- Orientalism,
- and Islam and the West.

Armstrong's work encourages Religious Studies educators to move beyond merely descriptive approaches toward ethical and transformative engagement with religion. It highlights the importance of teaching religion not only as a historical phenomenon but also as a source of moral reflection, human solidarity, and social responsibility.

The enduring lesson of the Axial Age is that religious education should contribute to the development of compassionate, critically reflective, and socially constructive individuals.

### **Critical Evaluation of Armstrong's *The Great Transformation*: The beginning of our Religious Traditions**

Karren's "**The Great Transformation**" has invited a substantial number of critiques, theologians, writers, intellectuals, historians as well theologians with the fundamental following three critical and analytical reviews:

This paper critically evaluates Karen Armstrong's interpretation of the Axial Age thesis. By contrasting her arguments in *The Great Transformation* with historical evidence and scholarly literature, this paper examines both the explanatory value of her comparative framework and its limitations in accounting for ancient religious change.

Despite the intellectual depth and interdisciplinary richness of *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong's interpretation of the Axial Age has generated important scholarly criticism. While her work offers a morally compelling and comparative understanding of religious transformation, several methodological, historical, and interpretive concerns deserve careful consideration.

#### **I. Historical Generalization and Civilizational Over-Synthesis**

One of the major criticisms of Armstrong's thesis is that it tends to overgeneralize similarities among historically and culturally distinct civilizations. Armstrong argues that between approximately 900–200 BCE, societies in China, India, Greece, and the Near East experienced parallel transformations from ritualistic religion toward inward spirituality, ethical reflection, and compassion. However, critics argue that such broad comparisons risk oversimplifying significant differences in historical context, religious practice, metaphysical assumptions, and sociopolitical structures.

For example, Confucian ethics in China primarily emphasized social harmony and political order, whereas Buddhist thought in India focused on liberation from suffering and attachment.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Greek rational philosophy differed fundamentally from Hebrew prophetic monotheism in both method and worldview. By grouping these traditions under one overarching "Axial" framework, Armstrong may unintentionally reduce the uniqueness and internal complexity of each civilization.

Although Armstrong acknowledges cultural diversity, her repeated emphasis on a common ethical awakening sometimes gives the impression of a unified historical movement rather than multiple independent developments. This interpretive tendency reflects the influence of Karl Jaspers, who himself described the Axial Age as the "axis" of human history. Yet critics maintain that parallel historical developments do not necessarily prove a single civilizational transformation.

#### **2. Problems of Historical Precision and Periodization**

Another important criticism concerns the historical precision of the Axial Age itself. Armstrong follows Jaspers in defining the Axial period broadly between 900 BCE and 200 BCE, but historians question whether such chronological boundaries are sufficiently precise or historically coherent.

The religious and philosophical traditions discussed in *The Great Transformation* developed gradually over centuries and often continued evolving long after the proposed Axial period. Moreover, some traditions identified as "Axial" did not emerge simultaneously. Greek philosophy, Hebrew prophecy, Upanishadic spirituality, and Confucian ethics developed under different historical conditions and timelines.

This raises an important methodological question: Is the Axial Age a concrete historical reality or primarily a symbolic interpretive category? Critics argue that the concept may function more as a philosophical framework for understanding religious evolution than as a strictly verifiable historical period.

Armstrong herself appears aware of this complexity when she emphasizes broad spiritual tendencies rather than precise historical uniformity. Nevertheless, the absence of clearly defined historical criteria leaves the theory vulnerable to charges of interpretive flexibility and historical ambiguity.

#### **3. The Relationship Between Ritual and Ethics**

<sup>13</sup> The Axial Age Thesis Pp 420-421

A central argument in Armstrong's work is that Axial spirituality represented a transition from external ritual toward inward morality and compassion. She frequently contrasts earlier sacrificial and ritualistic traditions with the ethical universalism of Axial thinkers.

However, critics argue that this distinction may create a false dichotomy between ritual and ethics. In many religious traditions, ritual practices continued to coexist with ethical teachings rather than being replaced by them. For example, Buddhism retained monastic rituals and devotional practices; Confucianism preserved ceremonial traditions; Judaism continued temple-centered worship alongside prophetic ethics; and later Christianity and Islam integrated both ritual and moral discipline.

Indeed, ritual itself often served ethical, social, and psychological functions. Armstrong correctly observes that ritual was not merely empty ceremony but a formative practice shaping communal identity and moral imagination. Yet her broader narrative sometimes implies that ethical religion emerged primarily by transcending ritual structures.<sup>14</sup>

A more balanced interpretation may suggest that the Axial Age transformed the meaning of ritual rather than abandoning it altogether. Ethical consciousness and ritual practice frequently remained interconnected dimensions of religious life.

#### **4. Normative and Moralistic Interpretation of History**

Although *The Great Transformation* is deeply informed by historical scholarship, Armstrong often writes less as a detached historian and more as an interpreter of religious wisdom with explicit ethical commitments.

Throughout the book, she consistently presents compassion as the highest expression of authentic religion and evaluates traditions according to their ethical contribution to humanity. Because religion is a foundational source of ethics and morality and it provides a strong moral and ethical foundation to human<sup>15</sup>. Her concluding reflections strongly advocate empathy, interfaith understanding, and moral responsibility in response to modern violence and extremism<sup>16</sup>.

This normative orientation gives the book considerable moral power and contemporary relevance. However, some scholars argue that it also shapes her historical interpretation in selective ways. Armstrong tends to emphasize those elements within religious traditions that support universal compassion while giving comparatively less attention to exclusivism, conflict, institutional power, and theological disagreement.

Consequently, critics suggest that Armstrong's work should be understood not merely as descriptive religious history but also as a constructive ethical project aimed at promoting interreligious harmony in the modern world.

#### **5. Romanticization of Ancient Spirituality**

Armstrong occasionally romanticizes ancient spiritual traditions while underestimating the political and institutional realities of religion. Her portrayal of Axial sages as advocates of compassion, selflessness, and universal ethics sometimes overlooks the ways religious traditions historically became intertwined with power, hierarchy, violence, and social control.

Although Armstrong acknowledges that many Axial thinkers emerged during periods of warfare and social crisis, her overall narrative often presents ancient spirituality as morally superior to modern civilization. Critics argue that this perspective risks idealizing the past while simplifying the complexities of both ancient and contemporary religious life.

The assumption that ancient wisdom can provide direct solutions to modern global crises may appear overly optimistic. Contemporary societies operate within radically different political, technological, economic, and secular contexts than those of the Axial period.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Armstrong's purpose is not merely historical reconstruction but ethical retrieval. Her emphasis on compassion seeks to recover moral resources within religious traditions

#### **Conclusion**

Karen Armstrong's "The Great Transformation" offers a compelling interpretation of the Axial Age as humanity's ethical and spiritual awakening. By emphasizing compassion, self-transformation, and universal moral consciousness, Armstrong presents religion as a force capable of addressing the moral crises of the contemporary world.

Although the Axial Age thesis raises important methodological and historical questions, its intellectual and ethical significance remains substantial. Armstrong's work succeeds not only as a historical interpretation but also as a moral call for interreligious understanding, empathy, and responsible global citizenship.

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<sup>14</sup> The Axial Age Thesis Pp 07-08

<sup>15</sup> Chan, C. and Ananthram, S. (2019), "Religion-based decision making in Indian multinationals: a multi-faith study of ethical virtues and mindsets." *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 156 No. 3,

<sup>16</sup> The Axial Age Thesis Pp 447

<sup>17</sup> The Axial Age Thesis Pp 383

Ultimately, the central insight of the Axial Age remains profoundly relevant: authentic religion is measured not merely by ritual or ideology, but by its ability to humanize individuals and societies through compassion and moral responsibility.

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