

IN BRIEF

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Women in the Mosque

ASRA NOMANI WANTS AMERICAN Muslim women to be able to enter mosques through the front door—literally. She wants them to be able to pray in the main hall without a barrier dividing them from men and to be permitted to address any member of the congregation. The campaign she describes in this book is a noble one, but it's not clear whether the American Muslim community can be persuaded to embrace it.

Nomani, a 39-year-old former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and unmarried mother, is not the first Muslim woman to seek such equality within an Islamic religious context. Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi, American professor Amina Wadud, and others have pushed for women's rights within Islam and have cited the Qur'an itself in defense of those rights. Their efforts have led to some modest successes. Wadud, for example, gained prominence when she led a mixed prayer service in New York last winter.

But such women struggle against enormous and complex cultural forces. In her first memoir, *Tantrika* (2003), Nomani told of coming to terms with the contradictions of being a Muslim born in India and raised in the United States. This second memoir takes up the story as she has a child out of wedlock and struggles against the barriers to full belonging in the religious heritage she feels is her birthright. At one point, she takes her son on a pilgrimage to Mecca and feels a profound identification with the woman Hajar (known in Jewish and Christian tradition as Hagar), who was cast out in the desert and wandered there in search of water for her son Ismail (Ishmael), revered as the ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad.

**STANDING ALONE
IN MECCA:**

An American
Woman's Struggle
for the Soul
of Islam.

By Asra Nomani.
HarperCollins.
320 pp. \$24.95

After returning from hajj, Nomani throws herself into the enormous task of trying to change American Muslim attitudes. In Morgantown, West Virginia, her hometown, she goes with her father to pray at the new mosque, only to hear a firm order from the board president, "Sister, take the back entrance!" "He expected me to take a wooden walkway along the right side of the building to a back door," she writes. "It opened into a back stairwell that led to an isolated balcony considered the 'sisters' section.'"

Most American Muslim men would surely prefer to see their sisters, wives, and mothers enter mosques through the front door, and many view the alternative as a departure from traditional practice, inspired by the rigid Wahhabi ideology—an ideology that is spreading in America as a result of Saudi Arabian funding of mosques and schools. Some progressive Muslim groups have encouraged Nomani in her quest. She writes that the secretary-general of the Islamic Society of North America, perhaps the largest of the mainstream groups, told her hometown mosque that it should back down from its backdoor policy. (It eventually did.) But "progressives" are a difficult group to measure. One can be progressive on social issues while retaining thoroughly traditional positions on religious and ritual matters.

Conservative Muslims, Wahhabi and otherwise, are, not surprisingly, among Nomani's most aggressive critics. (She has attracted a lot of very vocal opposition, especially online.) Some conservative religious scholars may intimidate moderate, flexible Muslims less confident about their knowledge of what the Qur'an requires. In fact, Nomani contends, the Wahhabi school has departed more than most from the original teachings of the Prophet. She describes arguing with one extremely conservative spokesman on his own ground. The man asks Nomani whether she believes a specific hadith (a tradition relating to the sayings or doings of the

Prophet) that states, “A woman’s honor lies in her chastity and her modesty. When she loses this, she is worthless.” If Nomani does not believe this hadith, he insists, then she is not a Muslim. Nomani, recalling that according to tradition, it is wrong to judge a person’s faith based on a single hadith, responds that a question that does not allow for *ijtihad*, or critical thinking, is unacceptable. She thus demonstrates not only that her defense of women’s roles is based on an understanding of Islam but that her religious scholarship is a match for his.

What’s compelling about Nomani’s effort is that it is not about the Westernization of Islam; it’s about competing approaches to Islam. The outcome of that competition will eventually reveal whether Nomani, who stood alone in Mecca, will have more company in America.

—Yasmine Bahrani

The Birth of Religious Inspiration

HALF A CENTURY AGO, THE German existential philosopher Karl Jaspers put forward a sweeping scheme to account for the appearance of so many of the world’s great religions and philosophies between 800 and 200 BC. Buddhism in India, Confucianism in China, Zoroastrianism in Persia, ethical monotheism in ancient Israel, and the Socratic tradition in Greece all arose in what Jaspers dubbed the “Axial Age,” when, he argued, the inheritors of prehistoric societies with tribal and place-bound sacred traditions were driven by anxiety and technological change to develop grander, more universal visions.

Such broad schemes have fallen out of fashion among historians, but a new generation of students in religion, the history of philosophy, and archaeology has eagerly taken up Jaspers’s formulation. Karen Armstrong, the gifted British popularizer of religion and religious history, in this book embraces the idea of the Axial Age, linking it to a vision of reli-

gion she has touched on in many earlier works.

Armstrong seems to have been attracted to the Axial Age idea as a description of the genesis of selflessness, personal and communal responsibility, and compassion—values that she believes survive only in theory in today’s religions. She argues that our society is in danger of recreating the fractious and hostile milieu from which the Axial Age philosophers sprang, partly because of the growth in so many religions of fundamentalism, with its rigid and uninspired interpretations of doctrine.

Armstrong has never shied away from big subjects. In earlier books she has taken on the evolution of the Judeo-Christian God, the holiness of Jerusalem, and the lure of fundamentalism. She returns continually to the importance of universalist religious ideas, those that reach out widely rather than seek to exclude, and the Axial Age is perhaps the only historical concept of antiquity that fits within this broad vision. *The Great Transformation* is, in that respect, the culmination of her worldview.

Unlike Jaspers, whose emphasis was on the origins of philosophies, Armstrong is drawn to what she calls religious geniuses. Finding none in the modern world, she seeks transcendence, she told a recent interviewer, in the “galaxy of spiritual stars in the Axial Age”—whether Socrates, Confucius, or Zoroaster. These geniuses looked around them at a world bereft of true morality, she believes, and they responded to it with the great insights that then spread worldwide.

Armstrong is a remarkable storyteller, folding detailed information from historical, archaeological, and literary sources into her narrative without overwhelming the reader. But her grasp of this vast scholarship is not always reliable, and a knowledgeable reader soon gets the nagging sense that *The Great Transformation* has more an agenda than a premise. On ancient Israel, for example, some of her conjectures fly in the face of current academic consensus. In an otherwise scholarly description of Israelite settlements in the hill country of the Levant in the first millennium BC, she abruptly concludes, seemingly based only on the biblical Book of Judges, that in

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION:
The Beginning of
Our Religious
Traditions.

By Karen Armstrong.
Knopf, 469 pp. \$30