

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

these apparently peaceful settlements without fortifications “the archaeological record shows that life was violent.” In fact, it shows just the opposite. But Armstrong’s version fits with her thesis that Axial Age spirituality was the product of a violent time in which religion and religious factions caused death and ceaseless struggle.

That vision, while intriguing, is altogether too facile. The Axial Age philosophies emerged from a violent milieu, true; but in almost every case they also came from societies that were becoming less closely knit and more misogynistic, possibly because of changes in technology. Armstrong attempts to draw parallels between Axial Age violence and today’s global inequities and other problems, but the references only highlight what has always been the most serious scholarly criticism of the Axial Age idea—its failure to consider social and economic strains that may have helped push these societies to such dramatic shifts in worldview.

Social justice and compassion did become key elements of Axial philosophies, but Armstrong fails to convince us that these were primarily the products of a spiritual transformation. Couldn’t the moral breakthroughs she attributes to spiritual geniuses have been the early stirrings of an underclass as society became more complex and produced more pressing inequities? A book less driven by Armstrong’s preconceptions might have allowed room to consider the down-to-earth changes that may have played a role in these revolutions of the spirit.

—Sandra Scham

Was He Crazy?

IN 1737, A MAN NAMED ALEX-
ander Cruden published an index
to all substantive words in the
King James Bible. It was 1,200
pages long and took 12 years to
compile. Cruden completed it
with no financial backing and,
unlike the authors of other biblical
concordances, with no one’s help.
And he did so in his spare time,

**ALEXANDER THE
CORRECTOR:**
The Tormented
Genius Whose
*Cruden’s
Concordance*
Unwrote the Bible.

By Julia Keay.
Overlook.
269 pp. \$23.95

when he wasn’t working or being hospitalized for insanity. Cruden’s earlier biographers make much of his insanity. Julia Keay, a writer and broadcaster, thinks they’ve got him wrong. “Such monumental and meticulous scholarship” could not have come from an insane mind, she says, and to prove it, she begins by laying out the few ascertainable facts of Cruden’s life.

Cruden was raised in Aberdeen, Scotland, and wanted to be a minister. But before he could begin religious training, he fell in love with a clergyman’s daughter who turned out to be pregnant by her own brother. She rejected Cruden, who pursued her so persistently that his friends had him locked up as a lunatic. On being released he left town, ending up in London as a “corrector of the press,” or proofreader. There he began working on his concordance: If he couldn’t be a minister, he could at least aid the spread of God’s word. When it was done, he published it himself by selling subscriptions. Concordances had been compiled before, but none was as comprehensive as Cruden’s.

He courted a rich widow, who told him he’d misread her friendliness and rejected him. Another of her suitors had him committed to a madhouse again. While there, Cruden kept a diary in which he referred to himself as “The Prisoner.” When he got out, he published his diary and brought a lawsuit against the madhouse, which he lost. His sister recommitted him when he got into a violent incident after apparently trying to break up a street fight. Again he kept a diary, this time referring to himself as “Alexander the Corrector,” and, upon his release, not only published the diary but tried unsuccessfully to get the government to appoint him the official corrector of the people’s morals. Turned down, he took correction to the streets and meekly asked people to go to church and not to swear.

A second edition of the concordance in 1758 made



Alexander Cruden