

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

*The World in the Time of
Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah*

KAREN ARMSTRONG

A Note About the Author

KAREN ARMSTRONG spent seven years as a Roman Catholic nun in the 1960s but left her teaching order in 1969. She studied English literature at Oxford University, earning the degrees of B.A. and M. Litt. Since then she has taught modern literature at the University of London, headed the English department in a girls' public school, and taught part-time at the Leo Baeck College for the Study of Judaism and the Training of Rabbis and Teachers. Since 1982, she has devoted her life to writing, lecturing, and broadcasting on religious affairs.

Her books include *Through the Narrow Gate*; *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*; *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*; *A History of God*; *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*; *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis*; *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*; *Islam: A Short History*; and *Buddha*. Her work has been translated into forty languages. She is also the author of three television documentaries and took part in Bill Moyers's television series *Genesis*. In 1999 she was awarded the Muslim Public Affairs Council Media Award.

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The Great Transformation is nothing less than a global account of the time when religious belief was born. It is one of the most original history books ever written.

The centuries between 800 and 300 BC saw an explosion of new religious concepts. Their emergence is second only to man's harnessing of fire in fundamentally transforming our understanding of what it is to be human. But why did Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jeremiah and Lao Tzu – among others – all emerge in this five-hundred-year span? And why did they have such similar ideas about humanity?

In *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong examines this phenomenal period and the connections between such a disparate group of philosophers, mystics and theologians. She has produced a remarkable and profound work.

KAREN ARMSTRONG is one of the world's foremost commentators on religious affairs. Her bestselling books include *A History of God*, *Islam: A Short History*, *Buddha* and her two volumes of autobiography, *Through the Narrow Gate* and *The Spiral Staircase*.

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Introduction

Perhaps every generation believes that it has reached a turning point of history, but our problems seem particularly intractable and our future increasingly uncertain. Many of our difficulties mask a deeper spiritual crisis. During the twentieth century, we saw the eruption of violence on an unprecedented scale. Sadly, our ability to harm and mutilate one another has kept pace with our extraordinary economic and scientific progress. We seem to lack the wisdom to hold our aggression in check and keep it within safe and appropriate bounds. The explosion of the first atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki laid bare the nihilistic self-destruction at the heart of the brilliant achievements of our modern culture. We risk environmental catastrophe because we no longer see the earth as holy but regard it simply as a “resource.” Unless there is some kind of spiritual revolution that can keep abreast of our technological genius, it is unlikely that we will save our planet. A purely rational education will not suffice. We have found to our cost that a great university can exist in the same vicinity as a concentration camp. Auschwitz, Rwanda, Bosnia, and the destruction of the World Trade Center were all dark epiphanies that revealed what can happen when the sense of the sacred inviolability of every single human being has been lost.

Religion, which is supposed to help us to cultivate this attitude, often seems to reflect the violence and desperation of our times. Almost every day we see examples of religiously motivated terrorism, hatred, and intolerance. An increasing number of people find traditional religious doctrines and practices irrelevant and incredible, and turn to art, music, literature, dance, sport, or drugs to give them the transcendent experience that humans seem to require. We all look for moments of ecstasy and rapture, when we inhabit our humanity more fully than usual and feel deeply touched within and lifted momentarily beyond ourselves. We are meaning-seeking creatures and, unlike other animals, fall very easily into despair if we cannot find significance and value in our lives. Some are

*Unless otherwise specified, all dates are BCE.

looking for new ways of being religious. Since the late 1970s there has been a spiritual revival in many parts of the world, and the militant piety that we often call “fundamentalism” is only one manifestation of our post-modern search for enlightenment.

In our current predicament, I believe that we can find inspiration in the period that the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age because it was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity.¹ From about 900 to 200 BCE,* in four distinct regions, the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity came into being: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece. This was the period of the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads, Mencius, and Euripides. During this period of intense creativity, spiritual and philosophical geniuses pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience. Many of them worked anonymously, but others became luminaries who can still fill us with emotion because they show us what a human being should be. The Axial Age was one of the most seminal periods of intellectual, psychological, philosophical, and religious change in recorded history; there would be nothing comparable until the Great Western Transformation, which created our own scientific and technological modernity.

But how can the sages of the Axial Age, who lived in such different circumstances, speak to our current condition? Why should we look to Confucius or the Buddha for help? Surely a study of this distant period can only be an exercise in spiritual archaeology, when what we need is to create a more innovative faith that reflects the realities of our own world. Yet, in fact, we have never surpassed the insights of the Axial Age. In times of spiritual and social crisis, men and women have constantly turned back to this period for guidance. They may have interpreted the Axial discoveries differently, but they have never succeeded in going beyond them. Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example, were all latter-day flowerings of the original Axial Age. As we shall see in the last chapter of this book, these three traditions all rediscovered the Axial vision and translated it marvellously into an idiom that spoke directly to the circumstances of their time.

The prophets, mystics, philosophers, and poets of the Axial Age were so advanced and their vision was so radical that later generations tended to dilute it. In the process, they often produced exactly the kind of religiosity that the Axial reformers wanted to get rid of. That, I believe, is what has happened in the modern world. The Axial sages have an important mes-

sage for our time, but their insights will be surprising—even shocking—to many who consider themselves religious today. It is frequently assumed, for example, that faith is a matter of believing certain creedal propositions. Indeed, it is common to call religious people “believers,” as though assenting to the articles of faith were their chief activity. But most of the Axial philosophers had no interest whatever in doctrine or metaphysics. A person’s theological beliefs were a matter of total indifference to somebody like the Buddha. Some sages steadfastly refused even to discuss theology, claiming that it was distracting and damaging. Others argued that it was immature, unrealistic, and perverse to look for the kind of absolute certainty that many people expect religion to provide.

All the traditions that were developed during the Axial Age pushed forward the frontiers of human consciousness and discovered a transcendent dimension in the core of their being, but they did not necessarily regard this as supernatural, and most of them refused to discuss it. Precisely because the experience was ineffable, the only correct attitude was reverent silence. The sages certainly did not seek to impose their own view of this ultimate reality on other people. Quite the contrary: nobody, they believed, should ever take any religious teaching on faith or at second hand. It was essential to question everything and to test any teaching empirically, against your personal experience. In fact, as we shall see, if a prophet or philosopher did start to insist on obligatory doctrines, it was usually a sign that the Axial Age had lost its momentum. If the Buddha or Confucius had been asked whether he believed in God, he would probably have winced slightly and explained—with great courtesy—that this was not an appropriate question. If anybody had asked Amos or Ezekiel if he was a “monotheist,” who believed in only one God, he would have been equally perplexed. Monotheism was not the issue. We find very few unequivocal assertions of monotheism in the Bible, but—interestingly—the stridency of some of these doctrinal statements actually departs from the essential spirit of the Axial Age.

What mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level. Before the Axial Age, ritual and animal sacrifice had been central to the religious quest. You experienced the divine in sacred dramas that, like a great theatrical experience today, introduced you to another level of existence. The Axial sages changed this; they still valued ritual, but gave it a new ethical significance and put morality at the heart of the spiritual life. The only way you could encounter what they called “God,” “Nirvana,” “Brahman,” or the “Way” was to live a compassionate life. Indeed, religion *was* compas-

sion. Today we often assume that before undertaking a religious lifestyle, we must prove to our own satisfaction that “God” or the “Absolute” exists. This is good scientific practice: first you establish a principle; only then can you apply it. But the Axial sages would say that this was to put the cart before the horse. First you must commit yourself to the ethical life; then disciplined and habitual benevolence, not metaphysical conviction, would give you intimations of the transcendence you sought.

This meant that you had to be ready to change. The Axial sages were not interested in providing their disciples with a little edifying uplift, after which they could return with renewed vigour to their ordinary self-centred lives. Their objective was to create an entirely different kind of human being. All the sages preached a spirituality of empathy and compassion; they insisted that people must abandon their egotism and greed, their violence and unkindness. Not only was it wrong to kill another human being; you must not even speak a hostile word or make an irritable gesture. Further, nearly all the Axial sages realized that you could not confine your benevolence to your own people: your concern must somehow extend to the entire world. In fact, when people started to limit their horizons and sympathies, it was another sign that the Axial Age was coming to a close. Each tradition developed its own formulation of the Golden Rule: do not do to others what you would not have done to you. As far as the Axial sages were concerned, respect for the sacred rights of all beings—not orthodox belief—was religion. If people behaved with kindness and generosity to their fellows, they could save the world.

We need to rediscover this Axial ethos. In our global village, we can no longer afford a parochial or exclusive vision. We must learn to live and behave as though people in countries remote from our own are as important as ourselves. The sages of the Axial Age did not create their compassionate ethic in idyllic circumstances. Each tradition developed in societies like our own that were torn apart by violence and warfare as never before; indeed, the first catalyst of religious change was usually a principled rejection of the aggression that the sages witnessed all around them. When they started to look for the causes of violence in the psyche, the Axial philosophers penetrated their interior world and began to explore a hitherto undiscovered realm of human experience.

The consensus of the Axial Age is an eloquent testimony to the unanimity of the spiritual quest of the human race. The Axial peoples all found that the compassionate ethic worked. All the great traditions that were created at this time are in agreement about the supreme importance of charity and benevolence, and this tells us something important about

our humanity. To find that our own faith is so deeply in accord with others is an affirming experience. Without departing from our own tradition, therefore, we can learn from others how to enhance our particular pursuit of the empathic life.

We cannot appreciate the achievements of the Axial Age unless we are familiar with what went before, so we need to understand the pre-Axial religion of early antiquity. This had certain common features that would all be important to the Axial Age. Most societies, for example, had an early belief in a High God, who was often called the Sky God, since he was associated with the heavens.² Because he was rather inaccessible, he tended to fade from the religious consciousness. Some said that he “disappeared,” others that he had been violently displaced by a younger generation of more dynamic deities. People usually experienced the sacred as an immanent presence in the world around them and within themselves. Some believed that gods, men, women, animals, plants, insects, and rocks all shared the same divine life. All were subject to an overarching cosmic order that kept everything in being. Even the gods had to obey this order, and they cooperated with human beings in the preservation of the divine energies of the cosmos. If these were not renewed, the world could lapse into a primal void.

Animal sacrifice was a universal religious practice in the ancient world. This was a way of recycling the depleted forces that kept the world in being. There was a strong conviction that life and death, creativity and destruction were inextricably entwined. People realized that they survived only because other creatures laid down their lives for their sake, so the animal victim was honoured for its self-sacrifice.³ Because there could be no life without such death, some imagined that the world had come into being as a result of a sacrifice at the beginning of time. Others told stories of a creator god slaying a dragon—a common symbol of the formless and undifferentiated—to bring order out of chaos. When they reenacted these mythical events in their ceremonial liturgy, worshippers felt that they had been projected into sacred time. They would often begin a new project by performing a ritual that re-presented the original cosmogony, to give their fragile mortal activity an infusion of divine strength. Nothing could endure if it were not “animated,” or endowed with a “soul,” in this way.⁴

Ancient religion depended upon what has been called the perennial philosophy, because it was present, in some form, in most premodern cultures. Every single person, object, or experience on earth was a replica—a pale shadow—of a reality in the divine world.⁵ The sacred world was, therefore, the prototype of human existence, and because it was richer,

stronger, and more enduring than anything on earth, men and women wanted desperately to participate in it. The perennial philosophy is still a key factor today in the lives of some indigenous tribes. The Australian aborigines, for example, experience the sacred realm of Dreamtime as far more real than the material world. They have brief glimpses of Dreamtime in sleep or in moments of vision; it is timeless and “everywhen.” It forms a stable backdrop to ordinary life, which is constantly enervated by death, flux, and ceaseless change. When an Australian goes hunting, he models his behaviour so closely on that of the First Hunter that he feels totally united with him, caught up in his more potent reality. Afterwards, when he falls away from that primal richness, he fears that the domain of time will absorb him, and reduce him and everything that he does to nothingness.⁶ This was also the experience of the people of antiquity. It was only when they imitated the gods in ritual and gave up the lonely, frail individuality of their secular lives that they truly existed. They fulfilled their humanity when they ceased to be simply themselves and repeated the gestures of others.⁷

Human beings are profoundly artificial.⁸ We constantly strive to improve on nature and approximate to an ideal. Even at the present time, when we have abandoned the perennial philosophy, people slavishly follow the dictates of fashion and even do violence to their faces and figures in order to reproduce the current standard of beauty. The cult of celebrity shows that we still revere models who epitomize “superhumanity.” People sometimes go to great lengths to see their idols, and feel an ecstatic enhancement of being in their presence. They imitate their dress and behaviour. It seems that human beings naturally tend towards the archetypal and paradigmatic. The Axial sages developed a more authentic version of this spirituality and taught people to seek the ideal, archetypal self within.

The Axial Age was not perfect. A major failing was its indifference to women. These spiritualities nearly all developed in an urban environment, dominated by military power and aggressive commercial activity, where women tended to lose the status they had enjoyed in a more rural economy. There are no female Axial sages, and even when women were allowed to take an active role in the new faith, they were usually sidelined. It was not that the Axial sages hated women; most of the time, they simply did not notice them. When they spoke about the “great” or “enlightened man,” they did not mean “men and women”—though most, if challenged, would probably have admitted that women were capable of this liberation too.

Precisely because the question of women was so peripheral to the

Axial Age, I found that any sustained discussion of this topic was distracting. Whenever I tried to address the issue, it seemed intrusive. I suspect that it deserves a study of its own. It is not as though the Axial sages were out-and-out misogynists, like some of the fathers of the church, for example. They were men of their time, and so preoccupied with the aggressive behaviour of their own sex that they rarely gave women a second thought. We cannot follow the Axial reformers slavishly; indeed, to do so would fundamentally violate the spirit of the Axial Age, which insisted that this kind of conformity trapped people in an inferior and immature version of themselves. What we can do is extend the Axial ideal of universal concern to everybody, including the female sex. When we try to re-create the Axial vision, we must bring the best insights of modernity to the table.

The Axial peoples did not evolve in a uniform way. Each developed at its own pace. Sometimes they achieved an insight that was truly worthy of the Axial Age, but then retreated from it. The people of India were always in the vanguard of Axial progress. In Israel, prophets, priests, and historians approached the ideal sporadically, by fits and starts, until they were exiled to Babylon in the sixth century and experienced a short, intense period of extraordinary creativity. In China there was slow, incremental progress, until Confucius developed the first full Axial spirituality in the late sixth century. From the very start, the Greeks went in an entirely different direction from the other peoples.

Jaspers believed that the Axial Age was more contemporaneous than it actually was. He implied that the Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, Mozi, and Zoroaster, for example, all lived more or less at the same time. Modern scholarship has revised this dating. It is now certain that Zoroaster did not live during the sixth century, but was a much earlier figure. It is very difficult to date some of these movements precisely, especially in India, where there was very little interest in history and no attempt to keep accurate chronological records. Most Indologists now agree, for example, that the Buddha lived a whole century later than was previously thought. And Laozi, the Daoist sage, did not live during the sixth century, as Jaspers assumed. Instead of being the contemporary of Confucius and Mozi, he almost certainly lived in the third century. I have tried to keep abreast of the most recent scholarly debates, but at present many of these dates can only be speculative, and will probably never be known for certain.

But despite these difficulties, the general development of the Axial Age does give us some insight into the spiritual evolution of this important ideal. We will follow this process chronologically, charting the progress of the four Axial peoples side by side, watching the new vision gradually tak-

ing root, rising to a crescendo, and finally fading away at the close of the third century. That was not the end of the story, however. The pioneers of the Axial Age had laid the foundations upon which others could build. Each generation would try to adapt these original insights to their own peculiar circumstances, and that must be our task today.

Glossary

- Achaean:** term used to describe the Mycenaean Greeks, many of whom lived in Achaea.
- Acropolis** (Greek): the sacred hill outside Athens.
- Agnicayana** (Sanskrit): Vedic ritual; the building of a brick fire altar for Agni, god of fire.
- Agon** (Greek): contest; competition.
- Agora** (Greek): the open space in the centre of a Greek city; a central meeting place.
- Ahimsa** (Sanskrit): “harmlessness”; nonviolence.
- Ahl al-kitab** (Arabic): usually translated as “the people of the Book.” But as there were very few books in Arabia in the seventh century CE, when the Qur’an was revealed, the term is more accurately rendered “people of an earlier revelation.”
- Ahura** (Avestan): “lord”; the title of the most important gods in the Aryan pantheon. The *ahuras* became the gods worshipped by the Zoroastrians.
- Am ha-aretz** (Hebrew): in the seventh century BCE, the rural aristocracy of Judah. After the return from exile, the term referred to the foreign people who had settled in Canaan after the Babylonian wars, and also Israelites and Judahites who had not been deported to Babylon.
- Amesha** (Avestan): “the Immortals.” In Zoroastrian religion, the term referred to the seven gods in the retinue of Ahura Mazda, the Supreme God.
- Anatta** (Pali): “no self”; the Buddhist doctrine that denied the existence of a constant, stable, and discrete personality, designed to encourage Buddhists to live as though the self did not exist.
- Apeiron** (Greek): the “indefinite” original substance of the cosmos in the philosophy of Anaximander.
- Aranya** (Sanskrit): forest; jungle. The Aranyakas (“Forest Texts”) give an esoteric interpretation of the Vedic rites.
- Archetype** (Greek derivation): the “original pattern” or paradigm. A term connected with the perennial philosophy that sees every earthly object or experience as a replica, a pale shadow of a more powerful, richer reality in the heavenly world. In ancient religion, the return to the archetypal reality was regarded as the fulfilment of a person or object. One thus attained a fuller, richer existence.
- Areopagus** (Greek): the rocky hillock near the agora of Athens that was the meeting place of the aristocratic Council of Elders (often known as the Areopagus Council).
- Aristeia** (Greek): the “victorious rampage” of the Greek warrior, who lost himself in an ecstasy of battle rage.
- Arya; Aryan:** literally, “honourable, noble”; the Indo-European peoples, who originated on the steppes of southern Russia and migrated later to India and Iran.
- Asana:** “sitting”; the correct position for yogic meditation, with straight back and crossed legs.

- Asha** (Avestan): the sacred order that held the universe together and made life possible.
- Ashavan** (Avestan): the “champions of *asha*” in Zoroastrian religion.
- Asura** (Sanskrit): see *ahura*. The Vedic Aryans demoted the *asuras*, who were worshipped by the Zoroastrians. They regarded them as passive and sedentary, compared with the dynamic *devas*.
- Ataraxia** (Greek): freedom from pain.
- Atman** (Sanskrit): the immortal and eternal “self” sought by renouncers and Upanishadic mystics, which was believed to be identical with the brahman.
- Avatara** (Sanskrit): “manifestation”; “descent”; the earthly appearance of one of the gods. Krishna, for example, is an *avatara* of the Vedic god Vishnu.
- Bandhu**: “connection.” In Vedic ritual science, the sacrificer and priest were supposed to look for links between earthly and heavenly realities when performing a sacrifice. The *bandhu* was based on a resemblance of function or appearance, or on a mythical connection between two objects.
- Basileus** (Greek): plural *basileis*: “lords”; the Greek aristocrats.
- Bhakti** (Sanskrit): “love”; “devotion”; the name given to the Indian religion that is based on an emotional surrender to a god. A *bhakta* is a devotee of, for example, Shiva or Vishnu.
- Bin** (Chinese): “hosting”; the name given to the ritual banquet in honour of the ancestors, who were believed to attend. They were impersonated by younger members of the family, who were thought to be possessed by the spirit of their deceased relatives during the rite.
- Brahmacarya** (Sanskrit): the “holy life” of the Vedic student, during his apprenticeship under a teacher who initiated him into sacrificial lore. He had to live a humble, self-effacing life of *ahimsa* and chastity, while studying the Vedic texts. A *brahmacarin* is a Vedic student.
- Brahman** (Sanskrit): “the All”; the whole of reality; the essence of existence; the foundation of everything that exists; being itself. The power that holds the cosmos together and enables it to grow and develop. The supreme reality of Vedic religion.
- Brahmasiris** (Sanskrit): a mythical weapon of mass destruction.
- Brahmin** (Sanskrit): a Vedic priest; a member of the priestly class.
- Brahmodya** (Sanskrit): a ritual competition. The contestants each tried to find a verbal formula that expressed the mysterious and ineffable reality of the brahman. The contest always ended in silence, as the contestants were reduced to speechless awe. In the silence they felt the presence of the brahman.
- Buddha** (Sanskrit; Pali): an enlightened or “awakened” person.
- Buddhi** (Sanskrit): the “intellect”; the highest human category in the Samkhya system; the only part of the human person that was capable of reflecting the eternal *purusha*.
- Cheng** (Chinese): “sincerity.” A person was supposed to perform the rituals of China wholeheartedly, not hypocritically or grudgingly.
- Chthonian** (Greek derivation): the term that refers to the Greek gods who dwelt in or beneath the earth (*chthon*), such as the Erinyes.
- City Dionysia**: the annual festival in honour of the god Dionysus, when the tragedies were performed in the theatre on the southern slopes of the Acropolis.
- Coincidentia oppositorum** (Latin): the “coincidence of opposites”; the ecstatic experience of a unity that exists beyond the apparent contradictions of earthly life.
- Daeva** (Avestan); plural *daevas*: the “shining ones”; the gods. The Zoroastrians came to regard the *daevas* as demonic, and worshipped the *asuras*, the “lords” of the *daevas*, who were the guardians of truth and order.
- Daimon** (Greek): a lesser divine being. An intermediary between the higher gods and human beings.

- Dao** (Chinese): the Way; the correct course or path. The object of much Chinese ritual was to ensure that human affairs were aligned with the Way of Heaven. Human virtue consists of living in accordance with the *de*, the potency that expresses the *dao* on earth. In *Daoism*, the school represented in the Axial Age by Zhuangzi and Laozi, the *dao* becomes the ultimate, ineffable reality, the source from which all appearance derives, unproduced producer of all that exists, which guarantees the stability and order of the world.
- Daode** (Chinese): the “power of the Way,” expressed particularly by the king or prince. A magical potency that brings order to the world and to the kingdom.
- Demos** (Greek): the people.
- Deva** (Sanskrit); plural *devas*: “the shining ones,” the Vedic gods. Cf. *daevas*. The Zoroastrians demoted the *daevas* and regarded them as evil, violent, and demonic, but the Vedic Indians loved the dynamism of the *devas*, and worshipped them rather than the *asuras*.
- Dhamma** (Pali): See *dharma*. In Buddhist terminology, it generally meant the teaching of a particular school. The way of salvation.
- Dharma** (Sanskrit): a complicated word, with a range of different meanings. Originally it meant the natural condition of things, their essence, the fundamental law of their existence. Then it came to stand for the laws and duties of each class of Vedic society, which defined their function and way of life. Finally it referred to religious truth, the doctrines and practices that make up a particular religious system. In Pali, *dharma* became *dhamma*.
- Diadochoi** (Greek): the six “successors” of Alexander the Great, who fought for supremacy after his death.
- Dike** (Greek): justice; also the goddess of justice, one of the daughters of Zeus.
- Dukkha** (Sanskrit): “awry, flawed, unsatisfactory”; often translated simply as “suffering.”
- Dysnomia** (Greek): “disorder”; an unbalanced social policy, which allowed some elements of the population to become too dominant.
- Ekagrata** (Sanskrit): a yogic discipline; concentration “on a single point.”
- Ekstasis** (Greek): ecstasy; literally “stepping out,” going beyond the self; transcending normal experience.
- Elohim** (Hebrew): term that sums up everything that the gods mean to human beings; the divine. Often also used as a formal title of Yahweh and translated as “God.”
- En mesoi** (Greek): “in the centre”; a phrase expressing the open, accessible nature of Athenian democracy.
- Entheos** (Greek): literally, “a god is within”; the ecstatic experience of divine possession, especially during the mysteries of Dionysus.
- Erinyes** (Greek): the Furies; ancient chthonian deities who avenged the unnatural murder of kinsfolk.
- Eunomia** (Greek): order; a balanced society in which no single element is allowed to dominate the others. This is the term for the polity established by Solon in Athens in the sixth century BCE.
- Fa** (Chinese): “standard, pattern, method”; often translated as “law.” An important concept in the Chinese Legalist school.
- Gathas** (Avestan): Zoroastrian scriptures, seventeen inspired hymns attributed to Zoroaster.
- Golah** (Hebrew): the community of returned exiles in Judea.
- Goyim** (Hebrew): the foreign nations.
- Gramma** (Sanskrit): village. Originally the term referred to a troop of trekking warriors.
- Haoma** (Avestan): a hallucinogenic plant used in Aryan worship. Its stalks were ceremonially gathered, crushed, and mixed with water to make a sacred, intoxicating drink. Haoma was also revered as a god. See *soma*.

- Helots** (Greek): the indigenous people of Messenia, who were enslaved by Sparta when their territory was conquered.
- Herem** (Hebrew): the "ban"; the holy war of ancient Israel.
- Hesed** (Hebrew): often translated as "love" or "mercy," but originally a tribal term denoting the loyalty of a kinship relationship that demanded altruistic behaviour towards the family group.
- Hinneni** (Hebrew): "Here I am!" A cry uttered by prophets and patriarchs to express their total presence before God and their readiness to do whatever he wished. An expression of submission and devotion.
- Homoioi** (Greek): the "equal" or "uniform" ones; the title of the citizens of Sparta.
- Hoplite**: from the Greek *hopla*, "weapons." The Greek citizen-soldier who armed himself.
- Hotr** (Avestan; Sanskrit): the priest who was expert in the sacred chant.
- Hubris** (Greek): pride, selfishness; excessive behaviour; the refusal to keep within due bounds; egotism.
- Isonomia** (Greek): "equal order"; the name given to the government devised by Cleisthenes in Athens in the early sixth century.
- Jian ai** (Chinese): the chief virtue of the Mohist school; often translated as "universal love," but more accurately rendered "concern for everybody," a principled impartiality.
- Jina** (Sanskrit): a spiritual "conqueror," who has achieved the enlightenment of *ahimsa*. The Jains were a religion of *jinās*.
- Jing** (Chinese): the highest form of *qi*; the sacred essence of being; existence itself; the divine quintessence of all things.
- Jiva** (Sanskrit): a soul; a living entity that was luminous and intelligent. The Jains believed that every single creature—humans, plants, animals, even rocks and trees—each had a *jiva* that could feel pain and distress, and which must therefore be protected and honoured.
- Junzi** (Chinese): originally it simply meant a gentleman; a member of the Chinese nobility. The Confucians took away its class connotations and democratized it. For the Confucians a *junzi* was a mature, fully developed human being who had cultivated his innate capacities. Sometimes translated as a "profound" or "superior" person.
- Karma** (Sanskrit): "action." At first it referred to ritual activity, but was later extended to include all deeds, including mental acts such as fear, attachment, desire, or hatred.
- Karma-yoga** (Sanskrit): the phrase coined by Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* to describe the yoga of the warrior, who learned to dissociate himself from his actions, so that he was no longer interested in gaining any benefit from them.
- Katharsis** (Greek): "cleansing, purification." It referred originally to the purification of sacrifice and ritual; in tragedy, the audience cleansed their emotions of hatred and terror.
- Kenosis** (Greek): "emptying." In spirituality, the word is used to describe the emptying of self, the dismantling of egotism.
- Kshatriya** (Sanskrit): "the empowered ones"; the Indian warrior class, who were responsible for the government and the defence of the community.
- Li** (Chinese): rite; ceremony; the range of ritual lore that regulated the entire life of a *junzi*.
- Logos** (Greek): "dialogue speech"; reasoned, logical, and scientific thought. In some philosophies, such as Stoicism, it refers to the rational, ruling principle of nature.
- Mandala** (Sanskrit): a symbolic, pictorial representation of the universe, which is always circular in shape to indicate an all-inclusive pervasion; an icon of contemplation.

- Mantra** (Sanskrit): a short prose formula, chanted during a ritual. Sound was sacred in Vedic religion, so a mantra was divine, a *deva*. Mantras could encapsulate the divine in the human form of speech.
- Messiah** (Hebrew): "anointed one." Originally the term referred to the king of Israel and Judah, who was anointed during his coronation ceremony and achieved a special, cultic closeness to Yahweh. He became the "son of God," and had a particular divine task. By extension, Second Isaiah applied the term to Cyrus, king of Persia, who was Yahweh's king and doing Yahweh's work.
- Miasma** (Greek): a contagious, polluting power inherent in a violent atrocity against a family member or neighbour. It had an independent life of its own; it could contaminate perfectly innocent human beings who were related to the perpetrator or simply happened to be in the vicinity. Not dissimilar to radioactivity. Once the evil deed had been committed, its *miasma* could be eliminated only by the punishment—usually the violent, sacrificial death—of the perpetrator. The Erinyes were responsible for the elimination of *miasma* and hounded the guilty.
- Mitzvah** (Hebrew); plural *mitzvot*: the "commandments" of Yahweh's Torah.
- Moksha** (Sanskrit): "liberation" from rebirth and the ceaseless round of *samsara*; the consequent awakening to one's true self.
- Monolatry** (Greek derivation): refers to the worship of a single god. Monolatry is not the same as monotheism, the belief that only one god exists; a person who practises monolatry may believe in the existence of many deities, but has made the decision to worship only one of them. The prophets of Israel probably believed that other gods existed, but wanted the people to worship only Yahweh and take no part in the cults of other gods.
- Muni** (Sanskrit): a "silent sage"; a renouncer.
- Mystai** (Greek): people who undergo the initiation into a Greek mystery religion that gives them a personal and intense experience of the divine.
- Mythos** (Greek): "myth." A reality that in one sense happened once, but that also happened all the time. The mythical discourse that deals with elusive, timeless truth and the search for ultimate meaning, which is complemented by *logos*.
- Nibbana** (Pali): "extinction"; "blowing out"; the extinction of the self, which brings enlightenment and liberation from pain and suffering. In Sanskrit, this becomes *nirvana*.
- Niyama** (Sanskrit): the preparatory "disciplines" of the yogin, including the study of the guru's teaching, habitual serenity, and kindness to all.
- Nous** (Greek): "mind."
- Panathenaea** (Greek): the new year's festival of Athens, which celebrated the birth of the city. It consisted of a procession through the streets of Athens up to the Acropolis, where a new robe was presented to Athena for her cult statue.
- Pesach** (Hebrew): "crossing"; the name of the spring Passover festival, which eventually celebrated the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, when the angel of death passed over the houses of the Israelites but slew the firstborn sons of the Egyptians.
- Physikoi** (Greek): the "physicists," the natural scientists of Miletus and Elea in southern Italy.
- Polis** (Greek); plural *poleis*: the Greek city-state.
- Pranayama** (Sanskrit): the breathing exercises of yoga, which induce a state of trance and well-being.
- Prophet** (Greek derivation): a person who "speaks for" or on behalf of God.
- Purusha** (Sanskrit): "person." The term first applies to the primordial human Person who voluntarily allowed the gods to sacrifice him in order to bring the world into being. This archetypal sacrifice was celebrated in the Purusha Hymn of the Rig Veda. Later