

# Spirituality and Movement Building

by Grace Lee Boggs

Is it time to grow our souls?

Easter Sunday morning I heard a fascinating talk on Spirituality by Karen Armstrong on CSPAN.

Karen Armstrong, often called “the runaway nun,” left the convent in her early 20s, turning her back on the “narrow gate” of religion. Fifteen years later, while working on a film on Jerusalem, she started investigating the origins of Judaism. This led to her studying and writing readable books on the history of different religions.

I discovered her work after 9/11 when I wanted to know more about Islam.

In her latest book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, Armstrong explains how the great faiths (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, the Upanishads, the Hebrew Prophets) emerged during the 700 years from 900-200 B.C. in countries like China and India. This was a period, sometimes called the “Axial Age,” when societies on the Eurasian continent were undergoing a great transition: from tribalism, in which individuals were submerged in the community, to urban ways of living which challenged individuals to figure things out for themselves.

It was also a period of great violence when destructive weapons, made possible by new Iron Age technologies, were encouraging rulers to expand their turf by warring against one another.

The result was a profound social crisis in which old gods and old religions no longer provided satisfactory answers to new questions. Looking into their own hearts and minds, people felt the need for a leap in faith in what it means to be human. Prophetic voices began urging people to recognize a divinity and sacredness, both in ourselves and in others, and to practice compassion by surrendering our egos. In each of these faiths the rejection of violence was linked to the practice of compassion.

Thus all the great religions that emerged during the Axial Age include some form of the Golden Rule. For example, Confucius said that we should not act towards others as we would not want others to act towards us. In China the ideal ruler was no longer a warrior but someone whose deeds brought spiritual benefits to the people.

This new awakening to the divinity or sacredness within every human being is what Armstrong means by spirituality. Spirituality is a leap of faith, a practice of compassion based a new believing in the sacredness of our selves and other selves. By contrast, religion is belief in a body of ideas. Religious people, Armstrong said, tend to be doctrinaire; they often prefer being right to being compassionate.

Fifty years ago the Montgomery Bus Boycott gave rise to all the great movements of the 60s and 70s because it was not only a protest against injustice but a practice of compassion, of spirituality. Inspired by the youthful Martin Luther King Jr., people who had been treated as less than human began acting not just as victims but as

new men and women with a new faith both in their own sacredness and that of their opponents.

Armstrong is convinced that as a result of urbanization, globalization and rapidly changing technology, the whole world is now in the midst of a social crisis as profound as that of the Axial Age. We are therefore called upon to make a similar leap in faith, to practice a similar compassion based upon recognizing the sacred in our selves and in others. The relationship of Native peoples to the Earth as sacred rather than as a resource, she said, provides us with a model.

To me, as a movement activist, this suggests that in order to grapple with the interacting and seemingly intractable questions of today's society, we need to see ourselves not mainly as victims but as new men and women who, recognizing the sacredness in ourselves and in others, can view love and compassion not as some "sentimental weakness but as the key that somehow unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality." (Martin Luther King)

As the "Beloved Communities Initiative" (<http://belovedcommunitiesnet.org>) puts it, "These are the times to grow our souls."

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Grace Boggs has been an activist for more than 60 years and is the author of the autobiography *Living for Change*. She will celebrate her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday in June. For more on Grace Boggs go to [www.boggscenter.org](http://www.boggscenter.org).