

The World of the Axial Sages

The World of the Axial Sages:

The Age of Awakening

By

John C. Stephens

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To Denise

For the highest images in every religion there is an analogue in a state of the soul...

—Frederick Nietzsche, *Notes*, 1875

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PREFACE

Curiosity was the central force that guided me in writing this book. For quite some time, I have always wanted to know about the similarities and differences between the various religions of the world and how each tradition would measure up when placed side by side with the others. After pondering these comparative issues for a while, I realized that I needed to narrow my focus. This decision led me to stumble upon the “Axial Age”, that formative period of religious history dating back to the 6th through 4th century BCE. This historic era was a time of great religious and cultural change happening on a global scale. Since many of the major religions of the world find their roots in the Axial Age, focusing upon it seemed like the ideal place to begin my comparative analysis. Individual religious experience and the psychology of religion represent two additional sources of curiosity for me. Interest in these sorts of subjects led me to wonder about whether or not the personal dimension of religion played a significant role in the birth of the Axial Age.

As a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I spent most of my time studying the Greco-Roman religious traditions of antiquity and had little time to investigate comparative issues about the religious traditions of the world. In the past, I was impressed more by the many stark differences between the eastern and western religious traditions than their similarities; likewise, the forces of religious change always seemed much more fascinating to me than the forces of religious stability. It always appeared to me that the gulf between these two cultural worlds was so huge that one would never be able to bridge the gap between them. The eastern religions seemed to have a much more mystical and pantheistic view of the world whereas the western religions seemed much more preoccupied with sin and guilt. In recent times, I have become more and more interested in examining the common elements shared by the Asian religious traditions and the three great monotheistic religious traditions of the west including Judaism, Christianity and Islam; inevitably, this topic led me to explore the events of the Axial Age.

This book recognizes that throughout history people have sought to make contact in many different ways with the world of the supernatural. Finding patterns in the ways in which people have reached out to the sacred realm is an important type of scholarly research. The historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith has argued that the term “religion” per se is an invention of modern western scholars¹. One of the unfortunate consequences of this assertion is that in today’s world comparative studies in the field of religion have become a rarity. On the other hand, the field has seen a rise in the number of narrowly defined area-specific studies. Area studies are a valuable form of research, but they overlook some of the most exciting issues in the study of religion. Comparative research in the field of religious studies is important because it shows some of the underlying bonds uniting different cultural groups around the world. This book takes the position that terms such as “religion”, “Buddhism” or “the Axial Age” are perfectly acceptable to use for research purposes, especially for comparative research, as long as they are clearly defined with as much specificity as possible. From the standpoint of this book, the term “religion” will be defined as those beliefs and practices appearing in human culture that are directed to the sacred cosmos. Similarly, the term “religious experience” encompasses a variety of subjective incidents and occurrences which are interpreted by their recipients as numinous encounters with some aspect of the sacred cosmos. Defining and clarifying the meaning of the term “the Axial Age” will be one of the primary goals of this book. The case can be made that a variety of terms including the “Axial Age” have been invented by western scholars, but it is important to remember that the value of any intellectual construct is determined by its usefulness for the purposes of analysis.

In many ways, this book on the religious traditions of the Axial Age offers supporting evidence for a fundamental axiom proposed by the father of modern psychology, William James in his classic study of religious experience, entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James notes that “in the distinctively religious sphere of experience, many persons (how many we cannot tell) possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended.”² Further, this study finds guidance from the historian of religions Joachim Wach who defined religious experience as the way in which human beings respond “to what is experienced as Ultimate Reality.”³ As Wach points out, people who experience the sacred are frequently consumed with the propagandistic desire “to attract and invite others to see and hear as one has seen and heard.”⁴ These expressions of religious experience are embedded in a variety of cultural phenomena of interest to the student of religion including

myths, rituals and theological doctrines. That need to “attract and invite others” into the realm of the sacred is clearly demonstrated in the lives of the Axial sages.

One of the first things that I realized after exploring the so-called Axial Age for a while was that the label “The Age of Awakening” would be more suitable for describing this period of history. During this particular historical period, a variety of sages, prophets, priests, philosophers and their followers both in the east and west were beginning to slowly realize and literally “wake up” to the fact that the gods were far more than just simply larger-than-life supernatural beings possessing human-like qualities. Throughout the world new channels of communication with the divine were being discovered. My original concerns relating to the similarities and differences between the great religious traditions of the world could finally be addressed on a limited basis since many of these traditions, or at least certain ideological portions of these traditions, find their origins in the events of the Age of Awakening. My familiarity with the psychology of religion led me to realize that individual religious experience was an important factor in the birth of this global spiritual movement.

Religious diversity is one of the most noteworthy characteristics of the Age of Awakening. Many of the traditional religious beliefs associated with the old anthropomorphic gods of antiquity were being abandoned or at least re-conceived as manifestations of a spiritual energy existing everywhere in the universe, including the inner world of the person.⁵ Both in the east and west, spiritually-minded people were starting to take more responsibility for their own spiritual fate rather than depending upon someone else to do it for them such as the priests of the state. The sages and prophets of the Age of Awakening exhorted people to attune their thoughts and deeds to this invisible spiritual force lying at the foundation of everything in the cosmos. This reversal of spiritual values was happening on a global scale and involved many issues concerning the similarities and differences between the eastern and western religions. More importantly, this global awakening represented a huge step forward in humanity’s continuing spiritual evolution. Because of these reasons, the Age of Awakening became the focus of this book.

INTRODUCTION

THE AXIAL AGE

This book examines a series of momentous spiritual changes that occurred between the sixth and fourth century BCE, a period of history that has been labelled by some scholars as “The Axial Age”. In his well-known book entitled *The Origin and Goal of History*, German philosopher Karl Jaspers coined the term “Axial Age” to refer to that period of ancient history when a number of seminal religious and philosophic developments unfolded upon the world.¹ This was a time when several eastern and western prophets, sages and philosophers were instrumental in giving birth, either directly or indirectly, to a variety of large-scale religious movements. Despite running up against some stiff resistance from the religious mainstream, eventually these new religious and philosophic innovations gained a firm foothold in the civilized world.

In classical Greece, various philosophers including Pythagoras (570 BCE-495 BCE) and Plato (428 BCE-327BCE) sought new ideological perspectives to replace the outdated religion of the Greek city-state. In India during the first millennium BCE, a mystical tradition rooted in the practice of asceticism was rapidly unfolding. Roughly during the same period of history, the teachings of the legendary figure Laozi found a receptive audience in China among those who were searching for new mystical ways of communicating with the sacred. Confucius (551BCE-479 BCE) was another important Chinese sage of the Axial Age. In comparison to Laozi, Confucius was a conservative figure who was deeply appreciative of the traditions of the past. The Middle East also played a significant role in the spiritual revolution of the first millennium BCE. As early as the sixth century BCE in Persia, Zoroaster’s teachings about the Truth and the Lie led to the birth of another new religious movement known as Zoroastrianism. At the time of the Babylonian Exile(586 BCE-539 BCE), ancient Judaism underwent a process of radical spiritual renewal largely due to the inspired teachings of the Hebrew prophets.

The Axial Age was the birthplace of many of the world’s religious traditions. In comparing the general characteristics of the major eastern and

western religious traditions, there are some stark differences that begin to emerge. The events of the Axial Age represent the logical place to begin accounting for some of these differences. At that time, although an elaborate process of spiritual awakening was happening, the end result of these events in each geographic setting was not the same. In his Gifford lectures delivered in 1968 at Cambridge University, R.C. Zaehner uses the phrase "the desire for release" as a concise way to sum up the main thrust of Indian spirituality. Zaehner explains that in the context of the religious traditions of India, "the transmigration of souls is accepted not merely as a dogma, but as a self-evident fact and salvation means final release from the world of samsara, the unending round of births and deaths from which there appears to be no escape."² In Jainism, Buddhism and classical Hinduism, the world is considered to be an illusion that must be seen through. Living the life-style of a monk or nun was considered as the preferred way to counteract the inherently harmful effects of karma so as to free one's spiritual self from the clutches of samsara. In China, Confucius and Laozi understood the world in different terms. Instead of being an illusion, these sages believed that the world was real, but it was a place filled with greed and violence. Confucius believed that people had forgotten about traditional Chinese values such as treating one another with common decency and respect. Harkening back to the Sage-Kings of the by-gone Zhou dynasty, he sought to teach people about the principles of social etiquette. The other-worldly quality of Confucius' teachings is found in his discussions about the principle known as the Mandate of Heaven. Confucius believed that people's behavior in this world needed to conform to the dictates of this cosmic force. Laozi had similar ideas, but instead of concentrating upon external behavior, Laozi recommended taking an inward mystical route, focusing upon the eternal Dao. In eastern religions, a number of different names refer to this ubiquitous spiritual force permeating the cosmos including the Brahman, Nirvana, the Dao and the Mandate of Heaven, to name a few. Thus, eastern religions have a characteristic otherworldly and mystical quality that does not play such a dominant role in western religions.

In the western world, the Age of Awakening unfolded under different circumstances. Even though ideas about the transmigration of the soul appear in the thought of Plato and Pythagoras, these doctrines never really caught on in the west. Instead, there is a preoccupation with the problem of sin and evil. Generally speaking, western religion's interest in these ethical issues finds its origin in the Axial Age. In the west, the world of human experience was regarded as eminently real and so were the forces of good and evil. This world of lived experience was not an illusion; instead, it was the stage upon which the drama of salvation played out. The Hebrew

prophets learned about God's law directly, through revelatory experience in the form of dreams and visions. These visionary experiences taught the prophets that humanity's spiritual goal was not to escape this world, but to have faith in God and follow His commandments while one was alive. Humanity's reward would come in a future age when God would render His judgement upon the world. In visions, both the Iranian prophet Zoroaster and the Biblical prophets were told that human beings had to fight against the overwhelming powers of sin and evil. It was up to each human being to become morally responsible and freely choose God and the way of righteousness as opposed to a life of sin and guilt. Performing the old sacrificial rituals was a useless, empty activity. It was a difficult spiritual journey because even if one knew what was right, the powers of Satan, or the Lie, as Zoroaster put it, could sway you in the wrong direction.

For the Greek philosophers, the problem was cast in slightly different terms. For philosophers such as Socrates, everything rested upon knowledge. If one knew the Good, then one would do the good, but if one was ignorant, then one would choose evil. The Greek philosophers rejected the old myths of the polis because they were based upon false beliefs and childish superstitions. They realized that although humans have freedom of choice, they are imprisoned by their ignorance. Because of our ignorance of the good, we choose a life of inequity. From this perspective, redemption can only be attained through education and developing our powers of rationality.

In spite of all of these different spiritual orientations, collectively the Axial sages understood through their own personal experience that making contact and developing a relationship with the divine had its challenges. It required a personal commitment and spiritual fortitude; there would be failures along the way. A deeper kind of spirituality was involved. The Hebrew Bible tells us that the Chosen people did not always find it convenient to follow God's law and there were many missteps along the way. Following Zoroaster's call to follow the Truth and reject the Lie placed moral demands upon the individual. Living the life of a Buddhist monk was not stress-free either because without inner strength, it was easy to fall victim to the desires of the flesh. Learning to think like a Greek philosopher had its difficulties as well. Confucius recommended treating others with courtesy and respect, but that was not always a simple matter in the face of hatred, corruption and violence. None of the old religious traditions of the past placed such personal demands upon the individual. In the past, one could depend upon the temple priests to take care of performing the rituals.

In the Axial Age, the time had finally come for people to live their lives according to a higher, divine standard.

The Value of the Individual

Many of the larger macro-trends of the Axial Age can be clarified by examining the ways in which the Axial sages apprehended the sacred. Studying the lives of these individuals leads one to appreciate the fact that their personal religious experiences were a contributing factor in the emergence of the Axial Age. Actually, new kinds of religious awareness are exhibited in the personal lives of the Axial sages. The knowledge and wisdom gained from their numinous encounters with the sacred empowered these individuals to formulate their teachings about humanity's spiritual and ethical responsibilities. As a result, they passed on these teachings to others. Although some of these personal encounters with the sacred may have been forgotten or misunderstood by later generations of believers, the doctrines developed by the Axial sages continue to persist. Once these religious beliefs and ideas gained acceptance by the majority, they continued to exert an immeasurable influence upon the world. Many of today's major religious traditions of both the eastern and western world trace their origins back to the momentous spiritual changes of the first millennium BCE.

In some sense, this book focuses attention upon the complex subject of religious origins and admittedly, this is a topic that is filled with problems. In the words of Anne Vallely, "Discussion of origins in any religion is often fraught with ambiguities, as historicity and mythology are interwoven in such complex ways that they become hard to separate."³ Very little information is known about the personal lives of the Axial sages and so an aura of mystery and ambiguity surrounds their lives and teachings. In the centuries following their death, a variety of stories, legends and anecdotes began to circulate about them. Eventually some of these tales became recorded in a variety of literary texts. For example, legends and myths grew up about the miraculous birth of the Buddha and Zoroaster. Skeptics might easily be tempted to dismiss the historical value of these kinds of stories and narratives on the grounds that they are mostly made up of myth and legend and cannot be taken to be literally true or historically accurate. Such a limited perspective fails to recognize the real possibility that a certain kernel of spiritual truth might be present in some of these tales, allowing one to have a glimpse into the inner world of the Axial sages. Anecdotal stories about the life of Zoroaster, the Buddha or the Biblical prophets should not be categorically dismissed as historically worthless purely on the grounds

that the revelatory experiences described in them cannot be scientifically verified. A more fruitful approach to these kinds of narratives would be to seek to uncover the elements of genuine religious experience as they are articulated in these documents. Many of these stories contain descriptions of the Axial sages' personal encounters with the sacred, potentially providing an opportunity to learn about the contours of their interior spiritual world. To suggest the opposite, namely that nothing can be learned from these narratives seems a bit narrow-minded. At the very least, these idealized literary portraits help in understanding some of the ways in which the Axial sages served as exemplary models for the community of believers to emulate.

In the early days of the Buddhist tradition, there were many stories that developed within the community about the figure of Siddhartha Gautama, a prince who lived in northern India. Stories circulated about the time when Siddhartha saw four sights: a sick man, an old man, a dead man and a monk who appeared to be in a state of tranquility. Other legends spoke about his quest for enlightenment and how he learned about the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path while sitting under the Bodhi Tree. There is no way to verify the historical accuracy of any of these stories. Even though the veracity of the stories cannot be determined with any absolute certainty, nevertheless, much of what is contained in these narratives seems plausible. The idea that many fundamental doctrines of the Buddhist faith originated out of Buddha's personal encounters with the sacred makes a lot of sense. The opposite assertion, namely, that Buddha's religious experience had nothing to do with their origination seems difficult to swallow. No metaphysical truth claim is being asserted if one speculates that the Buddha probably had some type of unusual psychological experience which inspired his teachings, including the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Whether the supernatural exists or does not exist is a question that goes beyond the boundaries of this study. Unless one can come up with a better theory, it makes sense to accept the general picture that is presented in these stories of Buddha's life, namely, that experiences which were interpreted by him to be encounters with the sacred, play a key role in many of the events of Buddha's life. As the story of the Buddha indicates, his essential teachings were the by-product of his earth-shattering enlightenment experience under the Bodhi Tree. As we shall see, similar perspectives apply to many of the other sages of the Axial Age.

The phenomenologist of religion Gerardus Van der Leeuw points out that, "revelation is consummated in an object: it has its proper medium."²⁴ The sacred reveals itself so that it "loses its essential secrecy by so revealing

itself in an object, or committing itself to some medium.”⁵ Similarly, Joaquim Wach states that when a person comes to an awareness of the sacred there is usually a tendency to communicate what has been experienced in various ways.⁶ Buddha’s personal apprehension of the sacred finds its expression in many of the anecdotal narratives describing his life as well as his doctrines and the community of believers. These three things, namely the Buddha, his doctrines (*dharma*) and the community of believers (*sangha*) have come to be known as the “Three Jewels” or the “Triple Gem” of the Buddhist tradition. Buddhists say they “take refuge” in them.

One way to increase an appreciation of the collective spiritual developments of this historical period is to explore some of the hagiographies of the Axial sages. Most of these hagiographies were written many years after the sage’s death. Since hagiographies are idealized biographical portraits of spiritual figures such as the Buddha, it is difficult to expect them to be entirely historically accurate. Nevertheless, they are helpful in understanding the general features of Axial spirituality. In some cases, there is no extant biographical information at all about a particular Axial sage or only very limited information. Virtually nothing is known about the lives of any of the anonymous authors of the *Upanishads* except for the well-known fact that they belonged to the community of brahmins living in the Indus valley at the close of the Vedic period. Similarly, little in the way of biographical information is known about the personal lives of the Hebrew prophets, except for a few scanty details. Iamblichus’ biography of Pythagoras is a mixture of fact and fantasy although it contains some interesting stories about Pythagoras’ journeys around the ancient world. Likewise, the first century CE biography of *Apollonius of Tyana* written by Philostratus contains a few biographical remarks about Pythagoras. In the *Apology*, Plato shares a few details about the life of Socrates. In Jainism and Buddhism, a few sutras report various legends about the life of Mahavira and Siddhartha Gautama respectively. Similarly, the Chinese historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien (154 BCE-80 BCE) relates a few details pertaining to the life of Confucius. According to the Zoroastrian tradition, Zoroaster is believed to have composed the *Gathas*, one of the sacred books of Zoroastrianism. In these writings a few stories are provided about his life and spiritual visions.

Although it is difficult to separate the strands of history and myth in these kinds of stories, nevertheless, these narratives are helpful in elucidating the nature of Axial spirituality as it was expressed in the lives of the Axial sages. Further, these stories provide evidence about some of the ways in which the Axial sages were perceived by their followers and peers. Undoubtedly, some of the reported material may be based upon actual events and some of

it may have been based upon rumors or legends and not be connected to actual events. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to separate truth from fiction one-hundred percent of the time. However, it would be an error to automatically assume that these stories and legends have no relevance for furthering our understanding of the Axial period as a whole. The nineteenth century German philosopher of history Wilhelm Dilthey placed the individual at the heart of all historical investigations since they embody many of the central themes of the collective whole. Dilthey writes,

the subject-matter of understanding is always something individual. In its higher forms it draws its conclusions about the pattern within a work, a person, or a situation from what is given in the book or person combined by induction. But analysis and understanding of our own experience show that the individual is an intrinsic value in the world of mind; indeed, it is the only intrinsic value we can ascertain beyond doubt. Thus we are concerned with the individual not merely as an example of man in general, but as himself... the unique contribution of understanding in the human studies lies in this; the objective mind and the power of the individual together determine the mind-constructed world. History rests on the understanding of these two.⁷

The Axial Age and the Nature of Religious Change

At the outset of the Axial Age, many citizens, especially among the educated classes and intelligentsia in China, India as well as Greece and in the Near East, were becoming increasingly skeptical about the value of the state religion. There was a growing apathy about the traditional gods who seemed to have little or no interest in human affairs. Many people within the educated community were beginning to view the sacrificial rituals of the state as outdated and barbaric. Against the background of this collective disapproval, there arose a select group of religious sages and philosophers who articulated a new vision of the cosmos that would eventually replace the obsolete religious myths and rituals of the past. Reaching deep down into the depths of their being, these sages conjured up a whole new set of innovative spiritual teachings which they subsequently passed onto the world.

Of course, these religious changes of the first millennium BCE represent just one of many times in history when the world has been besieged by change and development. Cultural shifts can be abrupt and cataclysmic or they can transpire slowly, predictably and with few consequences. Social and cultural change can occur either on a grand or small scale and for a variety of reasons including warfare, famine, population shifts, technological developments, migrations and changes in climate and

weather. The results can be a combination of positive and negative elements for society, depending upon the situation. Some of the factors contributing to widespread change within society, including climatic and weather modifications, may be well beyond the control of people. In some forms of societal change, inner psychological forces play an important role.

The historical development of democratic institutions illustrates some of the ways in which psychological processes and the conscious decision-making of individuals and groups can play a decisive role in bringing about change within society. In both the past and present, one of the guiding principles of those supporting democracy as a political system has been the principle of “majority rule with minority rights”. Individual rights, including freedom of speech, religion and assembly have collectively played an essential role in the preservation of democratic institutions. In the early days of civilized life in the distant past, prior to the time when the first democratic governments came into existence, political authority was usually held in the hands of a single powerful person, such as a warlord or a king. These leaders used their army to seize power and then continued to maintain their authority by coercive means rather than seeking the consent of the people. Autocratic governments, both in the past and present, have given few, if any, rights or special privileges such as voting rights or freedom of speech to the individual members of a society. History has demonstrated that it has been only because of the tireless efforts of those who are willing to fight for freedom that democracy has flourished on the world stage. In the modern era, the struggle for individual rights continues to be fought in various locations.

Similar ideological struggles have occurred in the development of religious institutions. Those favoring democracy have had to offer more than just criticism of authoritarianism in order to get their way. Likewise, throughout the history of religions, critics of the religious establishment have levelled objections to the conventional religious order and have offered a number of spiritual alternatives. There are many examples of these crusades for spiritual change throughout history. One good example is the “Great Awakening” which took place in North America in the seventeenth century. The “Great Awakening” was a spiritual revival movement led by a number of religious leaders including Jonathon Edwards. Leaders of the “Great Awakening” seriously criticized how members of the Protestant congregations in America had completely forgotten about developing a personal relationship with God by reading the Bible. Undoubtedly, Smith had developed a personal relationship to God which led him to exhort others to turn their attention to God through reading the scriptures, regardless of

whether they attended or did not attend church. On the external plane of existence, the effects of Jonathon Smith's first Great Awakening and the other revivals that followed were huge. Some historians believe that these religious revivals ultimately contributed to the subsequent American revolution.

Internal psychological forces also played an important role in an earlier stage of religious history dating back to the time of the first millennium BCE. This book is directly concerned with addressing some of the religious changes associated with this historical period. The changes of the Axial Age revolved primarily around internal, psychological modifications within the hearts and minds of people which, in turn, found their impact in the external world in terms of the development of transformative religious doctrines, rituals, literary expressions and institutions.

The Problem of Periodization in the Study of History

Typically, many historians prefer using categories and labels for describing historical eras. Some of the most popular ones that come to mind include the Gilded Age, the Enlightenment, the Age of Discovery, the Dark Ages and the Renaissance. The use of labels to describe periods of history is a common practice in the study of ancient history where there are many examples such as the Classical Age, the Hellenistic Age, the Age of Anxiety, etc. The term "Axial Age" is another example.

Although historians like to use labels to identify certain periods of history, they sometimes fail to consider the unspoken connotations associated with these labels. As a result, numerous misunderstandings and exaggerations can arise. The use of labels to describe historical periods tends to exaggerate the importance of the phenomena being denoted by that label. E. R. Dodds popularized the label "The Age of Anxiety" in reference to that historical period between the time of Alexander the Great and the end of the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE when the world was engulfed in a kind of spiritual pessimism. In his famous book entitled *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Dodds argues that certain melancholic persons including Marcus Aurelius and St. Augustine were representative of the dark spiritual climate of those times, but, of course, not everybody living in those times suffered from existential malaise.⁸ Likewise, only a small number of people in classical times were interested in artistic, scientific or philosophic pursuits even though the use of the label "Classical Age" could lead one to believe that such culturally uplifting endeavors were prolific throughout the Greek world during this time. Although labels may have use for describing

general historical trends, their employment can lead to distorted interpretations in the effort to fit the data into one's interpretive categories. Other misunderstandings can also arise from such terminology.

Upon closer examination, the frequent use of the term "Axial Age" by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers and others is not without its problems. One issue relates to identifying the essential characteristics of religious phenomena in their historical context. Beginning in the nineteenth century, scholars of religion became interested in trying to determine the essential characteristics of "religion". Several attempts to define the essential constituents of religion were proposed by those studying the historical religious traditions of the world. For example, the nineteenth century German theologian Rudolf Otto tried to boil religious phenomena down to their essential ingredients by identifying the "holy" as the fundamental component of religion.⁹ The problem with trying to locate the fundamental constituents of religious phenomena is that it over-emphasizes the importance of certain characteristics to the exclusion of others. In other words, it over-generalizes the importance of particular attributes and ignores others.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as Stephen Prothero points out, "Although it is important to avoid essentializing the world's religions, there is no way to avoid generalizations, either in the study of religion or in life."¹¹ Characterization of the Axial Age as a watershed moment in religious history is a generalization, but generalizations have heuristic value as long as one remains cognizant of the fact that there may be exceptions to the rule. The historical evidence should not be distorted in order to fit the generalization. Significant religious developments undoubtedly did take place during the Axial Age, but it is important to remember not to exaggerate their magnitude.

A similar kind of arbitrariness can happen whenever the boundaries of a particular period of history such as the Axial Age are determined. It is unclear when the Axial Age actually begins and ends. Some of the characteristics of the Axial Age are presaged in earlier periods of history. The foundations of the Axial Age were being laid in earlier times to some extent. Usually the label "Axial Age" refers to the period of history beginning in the sixth century BCE and concluding in the fourth century BCE since this was the time when a number of novel spiritual and philosophic ideas were born. The problem with this assertion is that the boundaries for a particular historical period such as "the Axial Age" often are blurred. Many of the discoveries of the Axial Age were anticipated in their rudimentary form in earlier periods of history. Even Confucius himself said that he was not an innovator, but a traditionalist. Many innovative ideas

expressed in the *Upanishads* were touched on in earlier Vedic hymns such as the *Rig Veda*. It is not always easy to pinpoint when a particular idea came into existence.

Other misunderstandings can also arise from historical periodization. Many uneducated people living in the Axial Age were not even aware of the Axial teachings. Many of the old rituals and religious customs continued to be practiced even though a variety of new spiritual beliefs and practices were coming into the picture. Despite the popularity of the Axial teachings, not everyone, including both those living during and after the Axial Age, were familiar with the Axial teachings. Many of the older traditions remained in vogue. Some of those who were aware of the teachings of the Axial prophets and sages did not necessarily accept or even understand them. Some people clung to the old comfortable conventions and religious conceptions of the past; others simply rejected them in favor of some other more simplistic ideology such as materialism.

Further, the term “Axial” has other connotations which are worth noting. It is the adjectival form of the noun “Axis” which Webster’s Dictionary defines as “a straight line about which a body or geometric figure rotates or may be supposed to rotate.”¹² An axis denotes an object existing in external space rather than within someone’s inner world. However, the prophets and sages of the Axial Age experienced the divine internally as a psychological event rather than externally as an object in the outer world. Thus, the term “Axial Age” tends to de-emphasize the importance of the catalytic psychological forces that were at work in this historic period. Jaspers’ use of the term “Axial Age” is also reminiscent of another closely associated term, *axis mundi*, or “center of the world”, which was popularized by the historian of religion Mircea Eliade in his analysis of religion.

Fundamental to Eliade’s interpretation of archaic religion is the distinction he makes between the sacred and profane. Eliade points out that in archaic times people believed that the gods existed in a numinous world that was completely removed from the everyday world of profane existence. On certain special occasions, a *hierophany*, that is, a manifestation of the divine would appear in the profane world. At the place where a manifestation of the sacred takes place, the three cosmic realms of heaven, earth and the underworld are brought into close proximity with one another. One symbolic representation of such a breakthrough of the sacred comes in the form of the *axis mundi* or the center of the world. In archaic mythology, there are numerous symbolic representations of the center of the world or

axis mundi such as the image of the sacred mountain, the Cosmic Tree of Norse mythology and the Cross in Christianity.¹³

Anthropomorphic and externalized images of the supernatural such as the symbol of the *axis mundi* have never entirely disappeared since their first appearance in archaic times, but by the time of the first millennium BCE something new was beginning to happen that was related to inner forms of spirituality. The use of the term “Axial Age” implies that the spirituality of this period consisted of experiencing the supernatural as an objective phenomenon, like the symbol of the *axis mundi* existing in a numinous world outside of oneself. On the contrary, what was novel about this period was that people were discovering that the divine also existed within their hearts and minds and not only in a numinous realm outside of themselves. Therefore, this book proposes that a better label for referencing the spiritual developments of this period is the “Age of Awakening” as opposed to the “Axial Age”. The label “Age of Awakening” places greater emphasis upon the internal, subjective aspects of religious experience in distinction to earlier anthropomorphic conceptions of the gods. Although historians have a preference for referencing collective social forces in developing their explanations, the label “Age of Awakening” emphasizes the importance of the personal dimension of religion in understanding these revolutionary spiritual developments of the first millennium BCE.

The Age of Awakening

In a sense, the events of the “Age of Awakening” were simultaneously progressive and retrogressive. On the one hand, there was a reaching out for new forms of spirituality, but, on the other hand, there was a nostalgic desire to return to the idyllic past, *in illo tempore*, to a time in the distant prehistoric past when people lived in union with nature and economic resources were equally shared among members of the tribal community. The Age of Awakening was a time when voices of criticism could be heard throughout the ancient world, setting the stage for the formation of new, alternative worldviews. For a number of reasons, the old traditions were rejected either in part or in whole or radically reformed. Some felt that the old traditions presented a misguided view of the cosmos. Others objected to the shallowness or ridiculous nature of the old mythological stories about the gods. Others simply said that the gods did not exist, but were invented by the officials of the state as a means to scare the masses into blind obedience.

Given the fact that many sages of the Age of Awakening could not have possibly influenced one another’s thinking, since most of them did not know

one another and lived in different times and locations, recently scholars have sought to identify a causal explanation for the religious developments occurring widely during this period of history. Various historical and sociological explanations have been offered for this unprecedented and extensive cultural and religious activity. The writings of sociologist Robert Bellah, the popular religious writer Karen Armstrong and Samuel N. Eisenstadt represent examples of such research. Each of these writers shared Jaspers' enthusiasm for exploring the issues. In his article entitled "Religious Evolution" Bellah argues that one of the most significant trends in human religious history was "the emergence in the first millennium BCE all across the Old World, at least in centers of high culture, of the phenomenon of religious rejection of the world and the exaltation of another realm of reality as alone true and valuable."¹⁴ In her book entitled *The great transformation: The beginning of our religious traditions*, Karen Armstrong made the case that what the religions of this period brought to the world was the need to be compassionate and kind to one another.¹⁵ The importance of intellectual activity as an important source of social and religious change during this period has been emphasized in the writings of sociologist Samuel N. Eisenstadt. Borrowing Max Weber's concept of charisma, Eisenstadt argues that the main carriers of this spiritual energy were the "autonomous intellectuals" of antiquity.¹⁶ Many of the innovative social, cultural and religious changes of the first millennium BCE may have been brought about in part as a result of the emergence of a social class of intellectuals consisting of priests, philosophers and sophists. Cultural contact and trade between civilizations may have also led to further reflection and the birth of compelling, new religious and spiritual ideas, some of which contradicted many of the older themes of the traditional myths.

In contrast to these collectivistic explanations, another important factor needs to be mentioned. Lying at the very foundation of the Age of Awakening was the personal search for meaning as it was expressed in the lives of figures such as Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Buddha and the Hebrew prophets. Earthshattering encounters with the sacred led these prophets and sages to reject the ossified traditions of the past and to preach a new message.

Overview of the Book

Following the Introduction, Chapter One sets the stage for discussing the Age of Awakening by considering the nature of religion and culture in prehistoric times and in the early days of civilization. Chapter Two through

Five discusses the Age of Awakening as it unfolded in the ancient western world. In Chapter Two an important forerunner to the Age of Awakening is discussed, namely, the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten who lived during the second millennium BCE. Chapter Three focuses upon the sixth century BCE Iranian prophet Zoroaster and his ethical views. The Hebrew prophets made important contributions to the Age of Awakening and their insights are examined in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, entitled “Awakening to the Logos”, the world of ancient Greek philosophy and its contributions to the Age of Awakening are discussed.

Chapter Six through Nine explores the Age of Awakening in the East. Chapter Six traces the development of the Age of Awakening in Vedic India. Chapter Seven and Eight examines the life and teachings of two important representatives of the Age of Awakening in India, namely, Mahavira and Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. Going further eastward, Chapter Nine begins with a discussion of the roots of the Age of Awakening in early Chinese religion. The rest of the chapter examines the contributions to the Age of Awakening made by a few Chinese sages including Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi and Laozi. Chapter Ten discusses the conclusions reached in this book about the Age of Awakening.

CHAPTER ONE

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF RELIGION

Sleep Patterns and the Age of Awakening

The startling events of the Age of Awakening did not appear overnight in a cultural vacuum, nor did they materialize out of thin air. An analogy is helpful for understanding how this period of history dawned upon the world. Just as a person goes to sleep at night and wakes up in the morning, religious institutions sometimes go through similar processes on a macrocosmic level. In a certain sense, the sleep cycle recapitulates the history of human consciousness. The term “prehistory” corresponds to the time when a person is asleep at night. When a person is asleep, various stages of slumber occur ranging from periods of total unconsciousness to times of greater awareness. Dreaming occurs during the preconscious stage of sleep; likewise, the development of humanity’s collective consciousness of the sacred reflects similar alternating patterns of awareness and unawareness as humanity moved from prehistoric to civilized conditions.

In recent times, sleep researchers have discovered that there are five stages of sleep.¹ During the sleep cycle, there are periods involving rapid eye movement known as REM sleep, and periods that do not involve rapid eye movement, known as non-REM sleep. During non-REM sleep, brainwaves slow down and are interrupted by bursts of activity called spindles. During the first half of the night, sleep consists mostly of non-REM sleep, but during the second half, dreaming occurs during the fourth and fifth stage of the sleep cycle. During REM sleep, the brain wave activity is very similar to the activity of an awake brain. Similarly, throughout history, religious behavior has manifested different levels of spiritual awareness. Through time, human consciousness has not always progressed in a straight line from lower forms to more complex forms of religious expression. Its progression is more analogous to the sleeping brain of a person as it oscillates back and forth between non-REM and REM sleep. On many occasions, there is movement back and forth between various modalities of spirituality. It is difficult to say whether a particular form of religious behavior is representative of an entire period of history. In the early days of civilization,

some religious activity may have anticipated many of the spiritual insights of the Age of Awakening. Likewise, during the Age of Awakening, older forms of religious expression of the distant past continued to be on display in certain contexts. The Age of Awakening corresponds to that time of day when a person first wakes up in the morning. At first, when a person opens their eyes, they may not be fully conscious and they may still remember some of their dreams from the night before. Soon the mind clears and a person gradually becomes fully awake. Similarly, in the first stages of the Age of Awakening, memories and themes from the past did not completely dissipate in the shadow of new insights and imagery.

Dynamic and Static Religion

Just as a person may need a little time to wake up in the morning, the sages of the Age of Awakening were helpful in rousing people from their spiritual slumber. In many respects, these sages and prophets exemplified certain elements of what French philosopher Henri Bergson referred to as the concept of dynamic religion.² Bergson made a comparison between what he called static and dynamic religion that provides some clarity about religion in the Age of Awakening. According to Bergson, static religion is a closed system that is resistant to change. Typically, static religion uses various techniques for legitimizing a society's worldview and authenticating its values including the use of traditional stories about the gods and the cosmos as well as systems of belief and ritualized forms of behavior. On the other hand, dynamic religion is a vital process that is more open to the destabilizing influences of mystical states of consciousness and the re-evaluation of the dominant religious values of a society.

In applying Bergson's model of "static and dynamic religion" to the Age of Awakening, one could say that in the early days of civilization, generally the focus was upon the performance of "static" external rituals associated with the state. Later on, during the Age of Awakening, a general shift away from earlier forms of spirituality occurs. Then, eastern sages such as Confucius, Laozi and the Buddha and western spiritual figures such as Zoroaster, the Hebrew prophets and some Greek philosophers including Pythagoras and Plato shifted their attention to dynamic forms of spirituality related to moral behavior, visionary encounters with the gods, mystical states of consciousness and other personalized forms of religious awareness. In the final analysis, these are only general trends and should not be interpreted to imply that earlier forms of static religion completely disappeared during the Age of Awakening; dynamic and static religious

elements congealed together in religious institutions throughout the east and west during this period of history, with the components of dynamic religion taking on more and more significance. These developments provide a good example of Bergson's ideas regarding "dynamic religion", even though remnants of static religion remained on the scene.

In addition to Bergson's ideas, the thoughts of the eighteenth century German philosopher Georg Hegel also are relevant for understanding the developments of the Age of Awakening. Hegel understood history as a dialectical process involving a clash between conflicting forces, which ultimately finds its resolution in the formation of a new synthesis of old and new ideas.³ The same kind of evolutionary development can be found in religious phenomena throughout the world. In Hegelian terms, whereas the traditional myths of the ancient world represented the thesis, the new spirituality developing in the Age of Awakening represented the antithesis. Once these new religious formulations gained acceptance within the community, the forces of institutionalization eventually took over. Then, the thesis, exemplified by the ideas of the static past and the antithesis, exemplified by the dynamic ideas of the Age of Awakening merged together to form a new synthesis. One corollary to Hegel's evolutionary hypothesis is that vestiges of past religious ideologies never completely go away or evolve into a new thesis; there have been many instances of degeneration and devolution throughout history. It is true that there are numerous instances of opposites appearing in various areas of human endeavor, but the opposites do not always find a satisfactory resolution or reconciliation. According to French scholar Claude Levi-Strauss, most mythic narratives are characterized by the appearance of binary opposites, such as the conflict between "good" versus "evil", or disputes between two or more people.⁴ A similar kind of tension operates in theological discourse.

Whereas traditional religious institutions tend to embody current social values, a new religious movement may not, at least not at first. At the time of their origin, the message of a religious prophet or sage usually is accepted only by a few people at first and may slowly gain traction in society over time if the message catches on. However, once the new message achieves acceptance within the community, it is susceptible to undergoing change and transformation as it becomes institutionalized.⁵ A combination of the old and new religious ideas is the resulting outcome of this institutionalization process.

The development of contradictory religious ideologies is not a phenomenon restricted to the Age of Awakening; examples can be found both before and

after this period of history. A first step in examining the emergence of the Age of Awakening is to clarify the function of earlier mythic and ritual formulations.

The Prehistoric Religious Outlook

In terms of our analogy to the sleep cycle, the religious activity of prehistoric communities corresponds on the microcosmic level to the time at night when a person is asleep. Just as a person has alternating periods of greater and lesser levels of brain activity while they are asleep throughout the night, prehistoric human communities demonstrated alternating levels of awareness about the divine. Understanding religious behavior in prehistoric times and in the early days of civilized life is a prerequisite for understanding the revolutionary developments of the Age of Awakening. To accomplish this goal, first the contours of the religious behavior of early humans will be discussed, followed by a brief examination of the emergence of religious institutions in the early days of human civilization. Since there is no firsthand literary evidence and very little hard archeological evidence regarding the religious beliefs and practices of prehistoric people, one is forced to engage in the art of speculation.

One way to go about this speculative venture is to begin by using the Darwinian principles of natural selection in conjunction with any other material at our disposal to formulate a general picture of human life in prehistoric times. In his seminal book entitled *The Origin of the Species*, Charles Darwin successfully demonstrated that self-preservation is the guiding principle of all living organisms; it is likely that similar patterns of behavior were exhibited in early human communities.⁶ Since the process of cultural change and development is usually gradual, it seems reasonable to assume that certain behavioral similarities may have existed between prehistoric people and those living in civilized conditions during the second and third millennium BCE.⁷

The Paleolithic Age began approximately fifty thousand years ago. The first early humans that lived during this period of prehistory are called Cro-Magnons. Archeological evidence from this prehistoric period reveals that Cro-Magnons were hunter-gathers and lived a nomadic life-style. They showed signs of intelligence because they used a multitude of tools and weapons. Given such clear indications of rationality among early humans, it is likely that some form of religious behavior may have existed in archaic times. Paleolithic rock paintings and the various tools, statuettes and other