

READING

from *The Great Transformation*, by Karen Armstrong

“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..... We seem to lack the wisdom to hold our aggression in check and keep it within safe and appropriate bounds..... 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..... 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. Some are 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. 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..... 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..... Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.... were all latter-day flowerings of the original Axial Age. These three traditions all rediscovered the Axial vision and translated it.... into an idiom that spoke... to the circumstances of their time.”

The Primacy of Compassion – and Action

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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How often do we think of the years BCE (it's politically incorrect these days to refer to them as BC, which means before Christ) as a time when nothing much was happening that could be relevant to us today? Five thousand years ago they were building Stonehenge and we think that was way cool that humans were doing astronomy. We have found bone and tool fragments from even further back that tell us things about human evolution and the first use of objects (technology) to make our lives easier. But to more recent ancient history we pay little attention. What do we know, for example, about the thousand years before the beginnings of Christianity? Most of our history seems to start with the birth of Jesus as if anything that really matters has only happened since then. Weren't there other enlightened beings before Jesus? I know you already know the answer to that question!

Karen Armstrong, whose words you heard for the reading this morning, has been a regular in recent years at Chautauqua and I was fortunate to hear her speak there again this summer. I'd already been reading this latest book, *The Great Transformation*, so I felt ahead of the game at her lecture. In seminary, of course, we studied the major world religions, many of which started in those Axial years of which Armstrong spoke, but the significance of those early religions and philosophies was not entirely clear to me until I read and heard her explanation and interpretation. These were amazing thinkers who were right on the money as far as I am concerned – and what they had to say fits perfectly with our own Unitarian Universalism.

In the words from Armstrong's introduction that I chose for the reading, I tried to give you a general idea about this period in history called the Axial Age, 900-200 BCE. In China, Confucianism and Daoism were born; in India, Hinduism and Buddhism; monotheism was conceived in the Middle East; and the philosophers of ancient Greece were ... philosophizing. What was amazing, and this is what Armstrong talks about in her book, is that all of these religions, in their original forms, emphasized the same things, even if with different words. And it is important to note that we are talking about the original teachings of these different religions, as later incarnations tended to become more doctrinal and move away from their origins in significant ways. We'll talk more about that in a minute.

I won't have time in this one sermon to go into the detailed history and belief system of each of the religions mentioned earlier, but I would like to tell you about the significant similarities among them, particularly as we consider the disparate locations and cultures in which they arose. In addition, I'll mention the changes that have taken place within these religions since their conception that would probably disappoint the founding thinkers, and lastly, we'll look at the reasons why those original ideas are pertinent to the situation we find ourselves in today.

By the way, as a result of another conversation I had this week, I had already been thinking that an adult religious education class on world religions may be in order, so let me know if you would be interested in attending such a class.

The Axial age began when philosophers, prophets, and mystics all tried to counter the cruelty and aggression of their time by promoting a spirituality based on nonviolence; of caring for the personhood of the other even amidst the realities of life and personal tragedy. This is the same story repeated in each culture, in each land, in which these major religious changes were happening.

“The Axial Age began in India when the ritual reformers started to extract the conflict and aggression from the sacrificial contest. Israel’s Axial Age began in earnest after the destruction of Jerusalem and the enforced deportation of the exiles to Babylonia, where the priestly writers started to evolve an ideal of reconciliation and ahimsa which means non-injury or nonviolence toward all life. China’s Axial Age developed during the Warring States period, when Confucians, Mohists, and Daoists all found ways to counteract widespread lawless, lethal aggression. In Greece, where violence was institutionalized by the polis,” the essential contribution to the Axial ideal was in the form of tragic theater. (p. 393-394)

This genre of theater helped us see that we must learn to see things from the other person’s point of view, a corollary to doing unto others as you would have done unto yourself.

“The religious traditions created during the Axial Age in all four regions were rooted in fear and pain. They would all insist, however, that it was essential not to deny this suffering; indeed to acknowledge it fully was an essential prerequisite for enlightenment.” (p. 59) For those of you familiar with Buddhist teachings you will remember that the very first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is “the truth of suffering.” Promoting nonviolence while at the same time acknowledging the existence of suffering is not a contradiction. It is realistic, and realism is at the heart of Axial wisdom.

The Axial sages all lived in violent societies like our own. *“What they created was a spiritual technology that utilized natural human energies to counter...aggression. The most gifted of them realized that if you wanted to outlaw brutal, tyrannical behavior, it was no good simply issuing external directives.”* (p. 390-391) They understood that human beings are probably conditioned to self-defense, ever since having lived in caves and being threatened daily by animal and human predators. But they set out to cultivate “an alternative state of consciousness,” (p. 391) in which at the heart of every decision to act is empathy for the other. It is the wisdom of the Golden Rule that enables human beings to transcend the moment and see the self destruction in the destruction of another. *“If such an attitude became habitual, people can live in a state of constant ekstasis, not because they are caught up in an exotic trance but because they would be living beyond the confines of egotism. The Axial programs all promoted this attitude.”* (p. 391-392)

The sages were also “ahead of us in recognizing that sympathy cannot be confined to our own group.” (p. 398) In ways similar to our own UU seventh principle about the connectivity of the interdependent web, Buddhist wisdom would have us cultivate what is called an “immeasurable” outlook that extends to the ends of the earth, without excluding a single creature from our radius of concern. A concern for everything is in our own best self interest, as we are rapidly finding to be the case in these days of global relationships. *“What happens in Afghanistan or Iraq today will somehow have repercussions in London or Washington tomorrow. In the last resort, ‘love’ and ‘concern’ will benefit everybody more than self-interested or shortsighted policies.”* (p. 398)

What should be our responses to suffering and violence, if we were listening to these Axial sages? First, they said, we must be self-critical. *“Instead of simply lambasting the ‘other side,’ [we] must examine [our] own behavior. The Indian doctrine of karma insisted that all our deeds have long-lasting consequences; blaming others without examining how our own failings might have contributed to a disastrous situation was ‘unskillful,’ unrealistic, and irreligious. So too in our current predicament, the Axial sages would probably tell us, reformation must start at home.”* (p. 394-395)

The second piece of advice the Axial sages promoted time and time again was to take action – practical, effective action. *“When they confronted aggression in their own traditions, they did not pretend that it was not there but worked vigorously to change their religion, rewriting and reorganizing their rituals and scriptures in order to eliminate the violence that had accumulated over the years. [The Hebrew scripture author called P] took the aggression out of the ancient creation stories, producing a genesis story in which Yahweh blessed all his creatures, including Leviathon, whom he had slaughtered in the old tales.”* (p. 395) I think some Christians today, and some Muslims, are attempting this very thing – to find within their core teachings the seeds of peaceful existence, not factionalism.

The concepts of the Axial sages, about what it means to be human and how we should behave toward each other and the earth were as insightful as any that have ever been proposed. What happened following this period of incredible vision was that later generations tended to dilute the progress that had been made, even producing exactly the kind of religiosity the Axial reformers were trying to eliminate. Karen Armstrong believes that this is what has happened in the modern world. Legislating religion was far from the Axial mind.

For most of what is considered the religious world today, for the Jewish and Christian people and those of Islam also, faith is, however, considered a matter of believing certain creedal propositions. The sages of the Axial age, each and every one of them, from Confucianism to Buddhism to Hinduism and to the Greeks, would be dismayed, as they had no interest whatever in doctrine or metaphysics. They did not care what you believed, and even went so far as to assert that theology was both distracting and perhaps dangerous. They argued “that it was immature, unrealistic, and perverse to look for the kind of absolute certainty” that is often considered the stuff of real religion. (p. xiii) In its original meaning the word “defined” means to “set limits upon.” I have talked about this before from this pulpit. When you hone in on specific beliefs, you diminish possibility.

The true test of a religion, for the Axial sages, was to ask if people’s beliefs made them act in intolerant or aggressive ways toward others. If so, they were not, what in India would be referred to as, “skillful.” If their beliefs helped them to act with compassion and hospitality toward the other, then that religion was true and sound.

“All of 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.”

(p. xiii) While other modern faith traditions would recoil at this, we UUs find this refreshingly in line with our own thinking.

For example, in the Hindu tradition, the concept of Brahman was not the equivalent of a god. Brahman was *“a power that was higher, deeper, and more basic than the gods, a force that held all the disparate elements of the universe together, and stopped them from fragmenting. It was the fundamental principle that enabled all things to become strong and to expand. It was life itself.”* (p. 23) Modern physicists could find little to fault in this description of the one substance of this entire universe – what science calls energy. I find it amazing that someone almost 3000 years ago could have insights as true to so-called recent scientific discoveries as these.

What mattered to the Axial sages was not what you believed, but how you behaved; not what was going to happen to you when you died, but what it was in this life that you needed to eliminate from your private list of personality disorders. Confucius said *“Till you have learned to serve men, how can you serve spirits?”* *“Till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead?”* (p. 205) These are very much in line, I believe, with Unitarian Universalist values.

Religion, in its Axial forms, was about doing things that changed you at a profound level. (p. xiii) The Axial sages valued ritual, but gave it a new ethical dimension – they *“put morality at the heart of 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 compassion.....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.”* (p. xiv)

Unitarian Universalism and its principles come close to the core of what Axial wisdom believed was crucial for the survival and flowering of humanity. I would caution that we talk a lot about things called justice and equality, but we tend to shy away from true expressions of love and compassion. These words are not to be found in the seven principles. In previous times perhaps these words were thought too emotional, not rational enough, for our tradition. This is just one area, the emotional nature of community, where I think our small group ministries fill in some of the blanks for Unitarian Universalism.

In a sermon last year I talked about a book called *When Religion Becomes Evil* in which the author called upon each of our current world religions to cull out that with which they have become burdened since their origins, for at the center of each is the same kernel of peaceful and compassionate living. This is the same idea that Karen Armstrong espoused in her book. She writes *“If religion is to bring light to our broken world, we need, as Mencius suggested, to go in search of the lost heart, the spirit of compassion that lies at the core of all our traditions.”* (p. 399)

Will this be possible? I don't know.

But do I hope that it happens? We all do.

May it be so.