



Religions of the World¹

Teilhard and the second axial turning

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At the outset, I would like to clarify my understanding of the situation in which the religions of the world (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) find themselves. Are they facing modernity? Or postmodernity? Or even a greater challenge? I believe they are facing a greater challenge than modernity or postmodernity. In fact, as I will develop below, I believe that it is the greatest challenge that has confronted the human race in its entire history.

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All the religions and all the peoples of the world are undergoing the most radical, far-reaching, and challenging transformation in history. The stakes are high: the very survival of life on our planet; either chaos and destruction, or creative transformation and the birth of a new consciousness. Forces, which have been at work for centuries, have in our day reached a crescendo that has the power to draw the human race into a global network and the religions of the world into a global spiritual community.

MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

Can this transformation be called modernity? Yes, if modernity is taken in the most general sense to mean our present situation. But the term “modernity,” as it has been used, carries other meanings and connotations. It has come to mean the intellectual and cultural heritage of Western science and the Age of Enlightenment. As such, it includes the empirical-rational mindset derived from scientific research, our industrial-technological lifestyle, free market economy, and the political ideals of individual human rights and democracy. Over the last four hundred years, Judaism and Christianity and more recently Islam have had to grapple with the forces of modernity, critically assimilating some of its values at the same time striving to maintain their religious heritage against modernity’s thrust towards secularization.

Over the last decade the mindset of modernity, especially in its scientific enterprise, has been radically challenged in intellectual circles. In its place there has arisen “postmodernity,”

a cluster of attitudes and positions that have turned away from science’s passionate search for a unified truth about the material world and have concerned themselves with an endless examination of human expressions in texts and cultural forms. Closely connected with this is an affirmation of pluralism in the form of multi-culturalism and the emerging voices of the oppressed.

In this essay I am making the claim that both modernity’s search for unity and postmodernity’s affirmation of pluralism reflect aspects of our present cultural and religious situation. However, neither provides the whole picture. At least in their origins, modernity and postmodernity are Western phenomena, and our present and immediate future is a global phenomenon. I believe, therefore, that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam must face this phenomenon together; but in so doing, they must face it also together with Hinduism, Buddhism, and the other religions of the world. Secondly, the West must cease reading history from within its own cultural horizons, as it usually does in tracing the origin and development of modernity and postmodernity. The forces that are bringing about our present transformation have been global from the start. It is imperative, then, that we make an attempt to see our history as a global history.

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In order to do this, we must disengage ourselves from any particular culture or religion, situating ourselves at a viewing point from which we can see clearly both cultures and religions in a global perspective. In doing this we will be like the astronauts who traveled into outer space and looked back on the earth. What they saw overwhelmed them! For the first time in history, humans actually saw the earth as a whole. They saw the earth's clouds, oceans, and continents, it is true, but not as discrete elements; nor did they behold merely a limited horizon as when standing on the earth's surface. Rather, they saw the earth as an interrelated, organic whole – a single globe of remarkable beauty and unity. It is striking that at the very moment in

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history when culture is becoming globalized, we have obtained our first sense impression of the earth as a single globe. This image of the beautiful blue globe, shining against the black background of the universe, moving in its orbit in space can concretely symbolize the emergence of global consciousness at the threshold of the twenty-first century.

THE AXIAL PERIOD

From our astronaut's position, let us look back in history to another period when the foundations of the world's religions were laid. If we look at the earth from our distant vantage-point during the first millennium BCE,

we would observe a remarkable phenomenon. From the period between 800-200 BCE, peaking about 500 BCE, a striking transformation of consciousness occurred around the earth in three geographic regions, apparently without the influence of one on the other. If we look at China, we will see two great teachers, Lao-tze and Confucius, from whose wisdom emerged the schools of Chinese philosophy. In India the cosmic, ritualistic Hinduism of the Vedas was being transformed by the Upanishads, while the Buddha and Mahavira ushered in two new religious traditions. If we turn our gaze farther west, we observe a similar development in the eastern Mediterranean region. In Israel the Jewish prophets – Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah – called forth from their people a new moral awareness. In Greece Western philosophy was born. The pre-Socratic cosmologists sought a rational explanation for the universe; Socrates awakened the moral consciousness of the Athenians; Plato and Aristotle developed metaphysical systems.

It was Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher, who some forty-five years ago pointed out the significance of this phenomenon in his book *The Origin and Goal of History*.² He called this period from 800-200 BCE the Axial Period because "it gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be." It is here in this period,

*"that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short, we may style this the 'Axial Period'."*³

Although the leaders who effected this change were philosophers and religious teachers, the change was so radical that it affected all aspects of culture; for it transformed consciousness itself. It was within the horizons of this form of consciousness that the great civilizations of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe developed. Although within these horizons many developments occurred through the subsequent centuries, the horizons themselves did not change. It was this form of consciousness that was spread to other regions through migration and explorations, thus becoming the dominant, though not exclusive, form of consciousness in the world. To this day, whether we have been born and raised in the culture of China, India, Europe, or America, we bear the structure of consciousness that was shaped in this Axial Period.

What is this structure of consciousness and how does it differ from pre-Axial consciousness? Prior to the Axial Period the dominant form of consciousness was cosmic, collective, tribal, mythic, and ritualistic. This is the characteristic form of consciousness of primal peoples. Between these traditional cultures and the Axial Period there emerged great empires in Egypt, China, and Mesopotamia, but these did not yet produce the full consciousness of the Axial Period.

The consciousness of the tribal cultures was intimately related to the cosmos and to the fertility cycles of nature. Thus there was established a rich and creative harmony between primal peoples and the world of nature, a harmony which was explored, expressed, and celebrated in myth and ritual.



Hieroglyphs: photo, Cetta Kenney

Just as they felt themselves part of nature, so they experienced themselves as part of the tribe. It was precisely the web of interrelationships within the tribe that sustained them psychologically, energizing all aspects of their lives. To be separated from the tribe threatened them with death, not only physical but psychological as well. However, their relation to the collectivity often did not extend beyond their own tribe, for they often looked upon other tribes as hostile. Yet within their

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tribe they felt organically related to their group as a whole, to the life cycles of birth and death and to nature and the cosmos.

The Axial Period ushered in a radically new form of consciousness. Whereas primal consciousness was tribal, Axial consciousness was individual. “Know thyself” became the watchword of Greece; the Upanishads identified the atman, the transcendent center of the self. The Buddha charted the way of individual enlightenment; the Jewish prophets awakened individual moral responsibility. This sense of individual identity, as distinct from the tribe and from nature, is the most characteristic mark of Axial consciousness. From this flow other characteristics: consciousness that is self-reflective, analytic, and that can be applied to nature in the form of scientific theories, to society in the form of social critique, to knowledge in the form of philosophy, to religion in the form of mapping an individual spiritual journey. This self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness stood in sharp contrast to primal mythic and ritualistic consciousness. When self-reflective logos emerged in the Axial Period, it tended to oppose the traditional mythos. Of course, mythic and ritualistic forms of consciousness survive in the post-Axial Period even to this day; but they are often submerged, surfacing chiefly in dreams, literature, and art.

Although Axial consciousness brought many benefits, it involved loss as well. It severed the harmony with nature and the tribe. Axial persons were in possession of their own identity, it is true, but they had lost their organic relation to nature and community. They



Axial Consciousness; original art, Lonnie Hanson

now ran the risk of being alienated from the matrix of being and life. With their new powers, they could criticize the social structure and by analysis discover the abstract laws of science and metaphysics, but they might find themselves mere spectators of a drama of which in reality they were an integral part.

The emergence of Axial consciousness was decisive for religions, since it marked the divide in history where the major religions emerged and separated themselves from their primal antecedents. The great religions of the world as we know them today are the product of the Axial Period. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Judaism took shape in their classical form during this period; and Judaism provided the base for the later emergence of Christianity and Islam. The common structures of consciousness found in these religions are characteristic of the general transformation of consciousness effected in the Axial Period.

AXIAL AND PRIMAL SPIRITUALITY

The move into Axial consciousness released enormous spiritual energy. It opened up the individual spiritual path, especially the inner way in which the new subjectivity became the avenue into the transcendent. It allowed the deeper self to sort out the difference between the illusion of the phenomenal world and the authentic vision of reality. On the ethical level it allowed individual moral conscience to take a critical stand against the collectivity. And it made possible a link between the moral and the spiritual aspects of the self, so that a path could be charted through virtues toward the ultimate goal of the spiritual quest.

One of the most distinctive forms of spirituality that became available in the Axial Period was monasticism. Although it had roots in the earlier Hindu tradition, it emerged in a clearly defined way in Buddhism and Jainism at the peak of the Axial Period and later developed in Christianity. Monasticism did not exist among primal peoples because their consciousness was not oriented to sustain it. Axial consciousness was ground in a distinct center of individuality necessary to produce the monk as a religious type. For the monks and nuns themselves take a radical stand as marginal persons, separating themselves from family and community, stripping themselves of material goods by practicing poverty and withdrawing from the fertility cycles by celibacy. They act as wandering beggars or as members of monastic communities who share their sense of radicalness.

Although Axial consciousness opened many possibilities, it tended to close off others and to produce some negative results. The release of spiritual energy thrust the Axial person in the direction of the spirit and away from the earth, away from the life cycles and the harmony with nature which the primal people experienced and which they made the basis of their spirituality. In some traditions this emergence of spiritual energy caused a radical split between the phenomenal world and true reality, between matter and spirit, between earth and heaven. Although in a number of traditions this separation was not central, nevertheless the emergence of Axial consciousness, with its strong sense of subjectivity, made that separation not only possible, but a risk and a threat. From the time of the Axial Period, the spiritual path tended to lead

away from the earth and towards the heavenly realms above.

Note that I am placing the radical transformation of consciousness in the first millennium BCE and not at the rise of Western science in the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment. It is, of course, true that Western science was innovative, even radical. Yet I believe that it developed within the horizons of Axial consciousness and represents one of its possible trajectories. In fact, at the same time that science enlarged the understanding of matter, it progressively narrowed Western Axial consciousness by employing exclusively a mechanical model and by limiting human knowledge to what can be grasped only by an empirical method. In Western science

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the earlier Axial split between matter and spirit was intensified. Descartes ignored spirit and saw mind as a detached observer of mechanical forces. Although this paradigm yielded enormous knowledge of the physical world, its narrow perspective only added to the fragmentation latent in the original Axial transformation.

THE SECOND AXIAL PERIOD

If we shift our gaze from the first millennium BCE to the eve of the twenty-first century, we can discern another

transformation of consciousness. It is so profound and far reaching that I call it the Second Axial Period.⁴ Like the first it is happening simultaneously around the earth, and like the first it will shape the horizon of consciousness for future centuries. Not surprisingly, too, it will have great significance for world religions, which were constituted in the First Axial Period. However, the new form of consciousness is different from that of the First Axial Period. Then it was individual consciousness, now it is global consciousness.

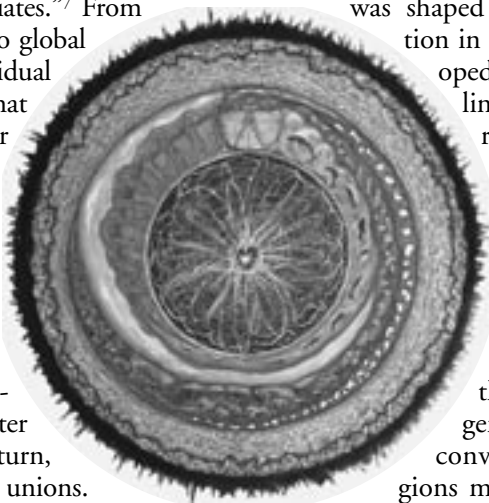
In order to understand better the forces at work in the Second Axial Period, I would like to draw from the thought of the paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.⁵ In the light of his research in evolution, he charted the development of consciousness from its roots in the geosphere and biosphere and into the future. In a process which he calls "planetization," he observed that a shift in the forces of evolution had occurred over the past hundred years. This shift is from divergence to convergence. When human beings first appeared on this planet, they clustered together in family and tribal units, forming their own group identity and separating themselves from other tribes. In this way humans diverged, creating separate nations and a rich variety of cultures. However, the spherical shape of the earth prevented unlimited divergence. With the increase in population and the rapid development of communication, groups could no longer remain apart. After dominating the process for millennia, the forces of divergence have been superseded by those of convergence. This shift to convergence is drawing the various cultures into a

single planetized community. Although we have been conditioned by thousands of years of divergence, we now have no other course open to us but to cooperate creatively with the forces of convergence as these are drawing us toward global consciousness.⁶

According to Teilhard this new global consciousness will not level all differences among peoples; rather it will generate what he calls creative unions in which diversity is not erased but intensified. His understanding of creative unions is based on his general theory of evolution and the dynamic that he observes throughout the universe. From the geosphere to the biosphere to the realm of consciousness, a single process is at work, which he articulates as the law of “complexity consciousness”. “In any domain,” he says, “whether it be the cells of a body, the members of a society or the elements of a spiritual synthesis – union differentiates.”⁷ From subatomic particles to global consciousness, individual elements unite in what Teilhard calls center to center unions. By touching each other at the creative core of their being, they release new energy which leads to more complex units. Greater complexity leads to greater interiority which, in turn, leads to more creative unions. Throughout the process, the individual elements do not lose their identity, but rather deepen and fulfill it through union. “Following the confluent orbits of their center,” he says, “the grains of

consciousness do not tend to lose their outlines and blend, but, on the contrary, to accentuate the depth and incommunicability of their egos. The more ‘other’ they become in conjunction, the more they find themselves as ‘self.’”⁸ At this point of history, because of the shift from divergence to convergence, the forces of planetization are bringing about an unprecedented complexification of consciousness through the convergence of cultures and religions.

In the light of Teilhard’s thought, then, we can better understand the meeting of religions on the eve of the twenty-first century. The world religions are the product of the First Axial Period and the forces of divergence. Although in the first millennium BCE, there was a common transformation of consciousness, it occurred in diverse geographical regions within already differentiated cultures. In each case the religion was shaped by this differentiation in its origin, and developed along differentiated lines. This produced a remarkable richness of spiritual wisdom, of spiritual energies and of religious-cultural forms to express, preserve, and transmit this heritage. Now that the forces of divergence have shifted to convergence, the religions must meet each other in center to center unions, discovering what is most authentic in each other, releasing creative energy toward a more complexified form of religious consciousness.



Sphere; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

Such a creative encounter has been called the “dialogic dialogue” to distinguish it from the dialectic dialogue in which one tries to refute the claims of the other.⁹ This dialogic dialogue has three phases:

- (1) *The partners meet each other in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, ready to alter misconceptions about each other and eager to appreciate the values of the other.*
- (2) *The partners are mutually enriched, by passing over into the consciousness of the other so that each can experience the other’s values from within the other’s perspective. This can be enormously enriching, for often the partners discover in another tradition values which are submerged or only inchoate in their own. It is important at this point to respect the autonomy of the other tradition: in Teilhard’s terms, to achieve union in which differences are valued as a basis of creativity.*
- (3) *If such a creative union is achieved, then the religions will have moved into the complexified form of consciousness that will be characteristic of the twenty-first century. This will be complexified global consciousness, not a mere universal, undifferentiated, abstract consciousness. It will be global through the global convergence of cultures and religions and complexified by the dynamics of dialogic dialogue.*

This global consciousness, complexified through the meeting of cultures and religions, is only one characteristic of the Second Axial Period. The consciousness of this period is global in another sense: namely, in rediscovering its roots in the earth. At the very moment when the various cultures and religions are meeting each other and creating a new global community, our life on the planet is being threatened. The very tools which we have used to bring about this convergence – industrialization and technology – are undercutting the biological support system that sustains life on our planet. The future of consciousness, even life on the earth, is shrouded in a cloud of uncertainty by the pollution of our environment, the depletion of natural resources, the unjust distribution of wealth, the stockpiling of nuclear



Earth at Risk; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

weapons. Unless the human community reverses these destructive forces, we may not see the twenty-first century. The human race as a whole – all the diverse cultures and the religions – must face these problems squarely. In this Second Axial Period we must rediscover the dimensions of consciousness of the spirituality of the primal peoples of the pre-Axial Period. As we saw, this consciousness was collective and cosmic, rooted in the earth and the life cycles. We must rapidly appropriate that form of consciousness or perish from the earth. However, I am not suggesting a romantic attempt to live in the past, rather that the evolution of consciousness proceeds by way of recapitulation.

Having developed self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness in the First Axial Period, we must now, while retaining these values, reappropriate and integrate into that consciousness the collective and cosmic dimensions of the pre-Axial consciousness. We must recapture the unity of tribal consciousness by seeing humanity as a single tribe. And we must see this single tribe related organically to the total cosmos. This means that the consciousness of the twenty-first century will be global from two perspectives:

(1) from a horizontal perspective, cultures and religions must meet each other on the surface of the globe, entering into creative encounters that will produce a complexified collective consciousness;

(2) from a vertical perspective, they must plunge their roots deep into the earth in order to provide

a stable and secure base for future development.

This new global consciousness must be organically ecological, supported by structures that will insure justice and peace. The voices of the oppressed must be heard and heeded: the poor, women, racial and ethnic minorities. These groups, along with the earth itself, can be looked upon as the prophets and teachers of the Second Axial Period. This emerging twofold global consciousness is not only a creative possibility to enhance the twenty-first century; it is an absolute necessity if we are to survive.

THE TASK OF RELIGIONS

What does this mean for religions on the eve of the twenty-first century? It means that they have a double task: to enter creatively into the dialogue of religions and to channel their energies into solving the common human problems that threaten our future on the earth. It means that they must strip away negative and limiting attitudes towards other religions. They must avoid both a narrow fundamentalism and a bland universalism. They must be true to their spiritual heritage, for this is the source of their power and their gift to the world. They must make every effort to ground themselves in their own traditions and at the same time to open themselves to other traditions. In concert with the other religions they should commit themselves to creating the new complexified global consciousness we have been exploring. Just to meet, even creatively, on the spiritual level is not enough. They must channel their spiritual resources

toward the solution of global problems. For the most part, this calls for a transformation of the religions. Having been formed in the First Axial Period, the religions bear the mark of Axial consciousness: in turning toward the spiritual ascent away from the material. The religions must rediscover the material dimension of existence and its spiritual significance. In this they can learn from the secular: that justice and

peace are human values that must be cherished and pragmatically cultivated. But they must not adopt an exclusively secular attitude, for their unique contribution is to tap their reservoirs of spiritual energy and channel this into developing secular enterprises that are genuinely human. It is in this larger context that I believe the religions of the world must face together the challenges of the Second Axial Period.

Waking: photo, Al Burgun



NOTES

¹This is a slightly revised version of “The Religions of the World: Facing Modernity Together” 1993. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. 30:3-4, Summer-Fall: pp. 417-425. Used with the permission of JES.

²Jaspers, Karl. 1949. *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Zurich. Artemis, pp. 19-43.

³Ibid., p. 19; trans. Michael Bullock, *The Origin and Goal of History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, p. 1. For the ongoing academic discussion of Jaspers’ position on the Axial Period, see “Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium B.C.” *Daedalus* Spring, 1975; and *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*. Ed. S.N. Eisenstadt New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

⁴For a more comprehensive treatment of my concept of the Second Axial Period, see my book *Christ of the 21st Century*. Rockport, MA: Element, 1992.

⁵Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *Le Phenomene humain*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955; see also *L’Activation de l’energie*. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1962 and *L’Energie humaine*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962. For a more detailed study of Teilhard’s thought in relation to the second Axial Period, see my paper “Teilhard de Chardin and the Religious Phenomenon.” Delivered in Paris at the International Symposium on the Occasion of the Centenary of the Birth of Teilhard de Chardin, organized by UNESCO, September 16-18, 198 1, UNESCO Document Code: SS.82/WS/36.

⁶Teilhard, *Le Phenomene humain*, pp. 268-269. ⁷Ibid., p. 292; trans. Bernard Wall. *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York:

Harper and Row, 1965, p. 262.

⁸Ibid.

⁹On the concept of dialogic dialogue, see Panikkar, Raimundo. *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979, pp. 241-245; see also, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.