

The Great Transformation
Victor Ashear 11/15/09

Karl Jaspers the noted psychiatrist and philosopher published *The Origin and Goal of History* in 1949. In the book he introduced the term the “Axial Age” referring to the period in history from 800 to 200 BCE. During that era thinkers in China, India, Greece and Israel simultaneously, and apparently independently, proposed ethical and theological ideas that bore striking similarity to one another and at the same time were quite progressive, perhaps radical, even by today’s standards. Jaspers labeled the period, the Axial Age because he believed the spiritual discoveries were pivotal in the development of civilization. The great spiritual personalities of that time tried to answer the most basic questions about human existence such as the meaning and purpose of life, the meaning of suffering, and how to distinguish good from evil. In 2006, Karen Armstrong (author of *A History of God* and numerous others) wrote a book entitled *The Great Transformation: the Beginning of our Religious Traditions*. Armstrong has devoted her life to the search of religion not as belief but as a gateway to the experience of the transcendent. This recent book is an effort to expand upon Karl Jaspers’ work regarding the Axial Age. The Axial Age occurred at a time when individuality and selfhood were emerging. As commerce and agriculture developed, power shifted from monarchs and priests to the market place. This in turn allowed selfhood to emerge. People in that era recognized new possibilities and sought to bring change to the deepest reaches of their consciousness. The notion of “God” changed from something outside of us to something inside, which humans could experience and aspire to. The sages of the era provided methods of disciplined introspection to discover a realm beyond the self, a reality that could not be described in words. Armstrong contends that these ideas were so radical that later proponents of religion felt they had to water them down. The result of the dilution was in fact to create the very dogmas the Axial Age writers were trying to avoid. For example in Janet’s talk, “Saving Paradise,” we learned the Christian vision of peace was converted in to a vision of war in around the 10th century ACE.

My talk this morning is largely a summary of Armstrong’s book. Here is what I plan to do with my talk this morning: First, I will summarize the common elements of the Axial Age created from the four different cultures and relate them to UU principles. Then I will summarize the history and development of the Axial Age in India, China, Greece and Israel. Finally, I will address the importance of the Axial Age principles to our current national and international strife.

My reading of Armstrong’s book led me to the conclusion that our faith, Unitarian Universalism, bears remarkable correspondence to the propositions of the writers of the Axial Age. Thus much of what we believe and practice as UUs is not especially new but is in fact about 2,500 years old. Armstrong contends the world has never achieved a level of civilization, ethics and morality higher than that achieved in the Axial Age. Armstrong adds the future survival of civilization depends on a return to Axial Age thinking and practice. So we UU’s have something important to offer the world because the principles upon which we stand correspond to those of the Axial Age.

What are the core beliefs and practices proposed during the Axial Age? (I am indebted to Reverend John Asenhurst for his summary.) Here they are:

- Reciprocity, compassion, love, and altruism, the Golden Rule, ending suffering for all human beings, all sentient life or perhaps all life is the proper central orientation of human existence.
- Preoccupation with god or gods, metaphysics, theology, belief systems, or other esoteric matters is not useful.
- Right practice, actions, and intentions can lead to true religious understanding rather than the other way around.
- Emptying oneself, eliminating craving, giving up the need for control, opening one's heart, embracing the void, losing oneself in perfectly performed ritual, deep study, and sensing the shared tragic in life through communal theater, are all pathways to compassion and the diminution of ego.
- Moving beyond the ego opens us to the transcendent
- Each person must find her or his own religious truths; formulas, authority and tradition don't work.
- Diversity among people is natural and to be honored.
- The point of religion is therapeutic, practical, and about **this** world - not some other, unknowable, afterworld.
- Violence and unkindness were to be abandoned.

Let us take a moment and compare this list with our own seven principles. See some similarities?

What I would like to do next is to briefly outline the history of the Axial Age and then talk about the importance of these principles for the future of the world. Armstrong's book is long, scholarly, and somewhat tedious so time permits only a brief sketch.

India. The original people of India migrated from the Steppes of Central Asia. Their earliest religious texts, the Rig Vedas ("knowledge in verse") were composed in 900 BCE. Listening to the Vedas being recited had an effect of opening the mind to "a deeper more fundamental truth," it was said. Also in this era the idea of a god, the creator, who "owned all the rest" of the gods emerged. Warfare as means of stealing provisions decreased as agriculture became a means of sustaining life. Written references of killing were replaced with the idea of the "symbolic sacrifice of self" as a path to union with the divine. Religion changed from a focus upon external gods to an "eternal self." In the 8th century BCE an early form of Yoga emerged and the first active monks appeared. These

monks renounced wealth, choosing to live in the forest. Student monks lived with and practiced under a teacher. The Upanishads appeared in the 7th century BCE. Yajnavalkya (yage-nav-lak-ya) taught there was “an immortal spark at the core of the person” which is of the same nature as the entire cosmos. (This was a central insight for all the religions of the Axial Age.) Yajnavalkya taught a method to achieve awareness of this and he also introduced the laws of *samsara* and *karma*. By the 6th century BCE Yoga was widely practiced in India. Yogis underwent “moral training in harmlessness,” which is to say, not hurting even a mosquito, not speaking unkindly, becoming indifferent to possessions and avoiding sex and alcohol. Yogis practiced sitting meditation with the goal of decreasing the ego. By the 5th century, the time of the Buddha, the law of *karma* became widely accepted. The Buddha did not believe in a supreme being. Itinerant teachers of this time taught renunciation of violence as the path to enlightenment. They defined enlightenment as “a state of absolute friendliness with all beings.” They sought as well the appreciation of the life force in all things, and compassion. The Jains were the most well known sect at the time who strived for friendship with all people through loving-kindness meditation. The Jains exist to this day. By the end of the 3rd century BCE sectarian violence erupted in India and religion reverted to a polytheistic form. Violence did abate in the 2nd century BCE.

China. Ancestor worship existed from at least 1600 BCE. The dead were thought to control the living. During rituals members of the royal family would dress up in the clothes of the departed as a kind of communion. By the 9th century the feudal system in China was declining and the king had lost much of his power, though he was still regarded as the “son of heaven,” and part of the natural order of the world. It was believed that the task of human beings is to act in concert with the divine to create a better world as, for example, in the building of roads. Ritual dances were performed to reenact the union of heaven and earth. In the 8th century the monarchy continued to decline in power and at the same time principalities were gaining power. An earlier practice of excessive slaughter of animals stopped, and an attitude of moderation ensued. Social harmony and etiquette became important and humility began to be emphasized. Emperors began to put the needs of the people ahead of their own. In the 7th century warfare decreased in China. In the 6th century warfare broke out again that threatened the breakdown of societal order. Confucius lived in this period and towards the end of the 6th century BCE his ideas began to spread. He was regarded as a kind and brilliant man and he had many followers. Some of his followers arranged his many aphorisms into a book. He advocated following the Tao, a religion that appeared his lifetime which embraced compassion, moderation and humility (known as “the 3 jewels”). Confucius emphasized this life over an afterlife. He was not considered to be primarily theological, but rather practical, in his focus upon character development and altruism, leading to positive interpersonal relationships. For Confucius how things were accomplished became more important than what was accomplished. He was a believer in equality. He is credited as being the earliest to articulate a form of the “Golden Rule:” “What I do not want others to do to me, I have no desire to do to others.” Between the 5th and 4th century in China there was much warfare again and unfortunately Confucius’ ideas lost sway. Towards the end of the 5th century Mozi taught universal love as a means to end the violence based in social inequality. Laozi’s classic work, *The Book of Changes* was popular from the

middle of 3rd century. Thirty chapters of the book were devoted to the mystical discipline that would transform the interior life and thereby improve the world.

Greece. Greece emerged from the collapse of the Hittite empire. It is said to have lived a “Dark Age” until about 800 BCE. In their religion, the Greeks retained their sense of tragedy from their experience of the Dark Age. The Greek gods were cruel to each other and to humans as well. Hera was seen as uncanny and unreliable and yet she was regarded as the “mother of life.” For the Greeks there was no ecstasy without loss. Greek women in this period followed the ritual of abandoning their husbands for 3 days, in keeping with the myth of Demeter. Rituals in general were rooted in fear and pain. The 8th century brought greater peace and more polytheism. Democratic city states cropped up that granted equal rights to all except for slaves. This was the time of Homer’s writing of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. However the stories themselves were much older. Most of the stories in these works dealt with heroism but one in particular, the story of Achilles and Priam, dealt with a theme of compassion. Greeks felt the presence of their gods in all important activities including art, love and war. In spite of retaining their polytheism the gods began to be seen in totality by the end of the 8th century. In the 7th century BCE the poet Hesiod championed social justice much as the Hebrew prophets did. During this century heroism and warfare were deemphasized. Men were taught to fight for the common good rather than personal glory. Freedom of speech became a right for all. Sparta became an ideal democratic state guided by *logos* and reason. In the 6th century, a compromise was reached between farmers and aristocrats, and equality and logic replaced myth as the basis of government in many city states. The “orphics,” a group active in this era, espoused nonviolence and vegetarianism. Science was emerging as a way to understand nature. Greeks in this period came to regard their democracy as “sacred.” During the 5th century BCE the heroes of the past were depicted with a new introspection. Conflicted depictions were presented in plays to allow the viewer to appreciate the other side. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides represented the “heart of Axis spirituality.” Sharing grief on the stage was believed to bring people closer together. The Persians, whom the Greeks had defeated in battle, were presented on the stage sympathetically. There was no supreme authority according to the Greek playwrights. Euripides stated that each person’s mind is divine. Also in the 5th century the Greeks developed technology to improve the quality of life of citizens. Socrates the most important of the Sophists (“wise men”) lived in this period. He invented the “dialectic,” a rigorous dialogue designed to expose false beliefs and elicit truth. By asking questions and analyzing the implications of the answers, he discovered the inherent flaws and inconsistencies of every single point of view. The struggle usually led to the admission that there was no answer. Once you had realized that you know nothing, your philosophical quest could begin. An ego diminishing procedure to be sure! In the 4th century Protagoras taught that each person’s truth is different and it is valid for him. Aristotle in the 3rd century taught we could see another person’s point of view though reason.

Israel. Like Greece, Israel emerged from the collapse for the Hittite civilization. The earliest records are from the 9th century BCE. The earliest Biblical texts are from the 8th century BCE. Abraham lived in the 1700’s BCE. The Old Testament was canonized

between the 5th and 4th century. By the 9th century the Israelis were decreasing the number of gods they worshiped. Elijah, who lived in the 9th century, was the first prophet to advocate monotheism according to Armstrong. In the 8th century Amos and Hosea spoke out against social injustice, particularly the plight of the poor and general moral decline. Hosea urged a return to communion with Yahweh. The prophets generally also preached that without ethics, religious ritual was an empty shell. *The Old Testament* story of Abraham's generosity towards the three strangers was seen as a model of compassion. The conquest of the Northern tribes of Israel during the 8th century BCE was read by the prophets as a sign of punishment by God. In the 7th century Josiah rededicated the temple in Jerusalem. The prostitutes were expelled and social justice was promoted, including aid to orphans and widows. The Babylonian exile occurred in the 6th century, as Jeremiah had predicted. The exile turned out to be a time of introspection and renewal for the Jewish people. New ethical rules were instituted including the Jubilee Year in which all land was returned from ownership, all debts were cancelled and love of the stranger was promoted. Attention was given to honoring all life similar to the practice in India. The Temple was rebuilt in 520 BCE. In the 5th century in Israel the era of Rabbinical Judaism was ushered in based upon the "Golden Rule," as well as the spirituality of "yielding," meaning to show empathy and concern for everybody. The rabbis of Axial Age accepted the principle that the ultimate reality was transcendent and ineffable. When they spoke of God's presence on earth, they were careful to distinguish those manifestations of God that were accessible to people from the divine mystery that would always be inaccessible. They used the words like the "glory" of God, the "holy spirit" rather than God.

The last chapter of Armstrong's book entitled, "The Way Forward" to me was the most important because in it she provides a response to the national and international strife and terrorism of our time. The Jews were propelled into the Axial Age by their exile to Babylon. Thus part of the inspiration for the Axial Age ethics was war and adversity. The Chinese found the Axial Age teachings the only hope for reducing warfare. The last Axial Age philosophers in China realized that no school of thought could claim a monopoly on the truth. Taoism and Confucianism were each seen to have merit. Taoism could get to the "center of spiritual life." Confucianism added the importance of morality and ritual. Respect for the viewpoint of another was more important than proclaiming a single vision. Later this openness allowed for the inclusion of Buddhism in China. Armstrong feels the world needs this kind of tolerance and inclusion now. Even though Axial religion declined in India in the 2nd century BCE as Hinduism ascended, the principle of nonviolence continued to hold sway. *Bhakti* or devotion to one's spiritual path as a means to reducing ego also remained. Buddhism also continued to be practiced in India after the Axial Age. In Israel, the Pharisees who were the most enlightened group at the time, continued to have influence after the Axial Age. Rabbi Hillel (80-30 BCE) taught that charity was the greatest commandment and the Golden Rule was the essence of *Torah* teaching. The Pharisees taught that the Temple and sacrifices were less important than the practice of love. Rabbi Akiva (a contemporary of Jesus) preached, "Love thy neighbor ..." as the greatest commandment. He also taught that disrespect to any human being was akin to denying the existence of God. Religious study became the Jewish form of mediation. The Torah was open to reinterpretation by each age, thus not

dogmatic. It was prohibited to utter God's name because the experience of the divine was ineffable and subjective. Jesus was not trying to establish a new religion but following in the footsteps of Hillel and Akiva. Paul of course, brought the Jewish teachings of love of all others without judgment and self sacrifice (*Kenosis*) to the gentiles. Mohammed, although he never heard of the Axial Age, emphasized compassion over theological speculation. Prayer and bowing common to Islamic practice were a means to reduce the ego. Compromise was preferred to warfare, and forgiveness and patience were encouraged in Islam. All the Axial Age writers sought means to reduce aggression. Their approach bore some remarkable similarities as we have seen. To review the highlights: 1. Eradication of the ego which was seen as the source of violence. 2. Empathic practice of the Golden Rule. 3. Promotion of the Golden Rule as the path to the divine and spiritual growth. 4. The contention that "ultimate reality" is unknowable. Armstrong poses a simple but important question; does dogmatic belief cause people to become belligerent or intolerant as opposed to compassionate? Real religion is much less about objective fact than about a call to action, Armstrong contends. (We UUs would agree.) Ronn spoke to this in his talk about faith. However, "centuries of institutional, political, and intellectual development... (have led to) institutional egoism, my faith is better than yours!" Unfortunately people prefer to be right than to exercise compassion. Fundamentalism tends to divide the world into "the faithful" and "the evil doers." This can easily lead to atrocities in Armstrong's view. Some contemporary writers such as Harris and Dawkins have falsely concluded that religion is the cause of violence. But we have seen that the Axial Age spiritualities were actually a response to the violence of their time. Unfortunately in the past 2000 years the application of religion became a justification of violence and terrorism, indeed the very antithesis of what the Axial Age writers had intended! The Jewish prophets for example admonished people to look inside themselves rather than to blame the enemy. This is very different from the view today that God is always on my side and I am always right. The prophet Amos set about to "puncture the national Israeli ego," in an era of rampant injustice and social irresponsibility. During the Babylonian exile, the prophet Ezekiel encouraged people to look at their own violent behavior rather than to maintain bitterness towards their captors. The Axial Age writers in general urged self-responsibility. The law of *Karma* is another example of this. Socrates taught us to challenge our most basic assumptions. All of the Axial Age teachers opposed dogmatism and egoism.

Our age is fraught with anxiety and pain. Another important lesson the Axial Age writers all taught is that suffering was an inevitable part of life and that we must be open to the sorrow of the world if we are to grow spiritually. Jeremiah and the Greek playwrights taught compassion for one's enemy. The Axial Age writers were not idealists. Their ideas about selflessness and compassion were tested in the world and they worked when they were practiced. These ideas emerged when the uniqueness and value of the individual was discovered and a new way of being human was called for. As the self was discovered, ways to actualize the self were sought. In our own time, technology has created a "global society." We are interconnected electronically, militarily, economically and politically. We must develop an ethical "global consciousness" if we are to survive. The insights of the Axial Age can help us achieve this. The Axial Age writers understood that compassion had to extend beyond our own group. Society could not and

will not develop without concern for the “other,” of a different faith, or culture, or nationality. To “love one’s neighbor” was to give support and loyalty. Today the entire planet is our neighbor. Confucius and the Buddhists created and taught rituals to enhance empathy and compassion. Empathy and compassion were and are still **the** method of spiritual growth. In Armstrong’s opinion this is the only thing that can save the world.

If I can give but one take home message from the lessons of the Axial Age it is to practice some form of compassion enhancement every day, be it meditation, prayer, seeking to help others, study, sensitivity awareness, what works for you. However we do so, may we come to increase our practice love and compassion and contribute to a more peaceful world.