

The Axial Age of 800 to 200 [BCE](#):

Evidence strongly indicates that during certain rare intervals in history there have been major advances in the world's political, philosophical, and religious systems. These major changes dominated thinking in the following centuries and millennia ¹

The sixth century [BCE](#), in particular, was a period of radical changes in basic religious concepts and the sudden emergence of new ideas. A radical change in humanity's spiritual development occurred which became a major source of most of our present-day faith traditions. ²

The rapid transformation cannot be satisfactorily explained by any acceptable theory of causation. Most of the new doctrines, which concerned a worldview and values, eventually became organized as religious systems. While many of mankind's traditional rituals and beliefs have been incorporated into these new religions, it was not a question of reformulation and development of old religious teachings; it was very much a fresh beginning. ²

In the years centering around 500 BCE, great advances in religion, philosophy, science, democracy, and many forms of art - occurred independently and almost simultaneously in China, India, the Middle East, and Greece. Spiritual foundations were laid which humanity still use today. ³ In these times of social upheaval and political turmoil, a new elite became the carrier of a new cultural and social order. Great religious leaders rose to prominence attracting a mass following, and many sociological, cultural, economic and spiritual changes were made:

- In China, many individual thinkers, such as [Confucius](#), [Lao-Tse](#), and Mo Tzu, began to reflect on the ethical and metaphysical implications of human existence. From their teachings arose Confucianism, Daoism and Jainism.
- In India, the authors of the Upanishads expanded the scope of their explorations to include metaphysical thinking in the search for the ultimate truth and the meaning of life and death. India experienced a dramatic socio-political and intellectual transformation, and produced the teachings of the [Buddha](#) and [Mahavira](#). Like China, new teachings ran the whole gamut of philosophical schools of thought, including even skepticism, materialism, sophism, and nihilism.
- In Palestine, the prophets Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Deutero-Isaiah made their appearance. The law and moral code of the Israelites dates back to before this age.
- In ancient Mesopotamia, cultural developments were relatively close to those in ancient Israel. However, concepts including the belief in a transcendent creator God, and full subservience of the political rulers to a God did not materialize. ⁴
- In Greece, developments were more philosophical than spiritual. Greece witnessed the appearance of:
 - Thales, Xenophanes, and Heraclitus who regarded all existence to be in a state of flux -- one cannot step in the same river twice,
 - Parmenides, who discoursed on the nature of permanent 'being' as opposed to 'becoming', and
 - Democritus, who devised the first atomic theory of nature.

These were the philosophers whose teaching subsequently influenced Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. What all these thinkers had in common was a thirst for discovering the fundamental principles of existence and the implications they had on human life and behavior. A major break-through from pre-axial beliefs involved their recognition of the great chasm between the transcendental / cosmic order, and ordinary human existence. ⁴

Each culture questioned and reinterpreted their previous cosmologies. Believers sought the supremely and eternally "real" that was supposed to lay beyond the world of senses and understanding. The rapid change in beliefs then stabilized and the implications unfolded. This became the source of major and lasting cultural traditions, most of which enduring to the present time. Note that complete rejection of all beliefs in gods, like complete rejection of all contents of myths, was practically unknown in the ancient world. What was actually rejected was the earlier concept of gods being larger-than-life human beings. ⁵

After the Axial Age came a secondary stage of spiritual transformation, which included the founding of the present world's two major religions, [Christianity](#) and [Islam](#).

The closely timed changes in China, India, Palestine and Greece -- countries that are widely separated from each other -- seems too remarkable to be dismissed as accidental. The only example of intellectual communication among these countries appears to be the conjecture that in the 6th century BCE the Greek poet Alcaeus may have known the prophecies of Isaiah. ²

Previous eras:

Similar questions were posed by religious and ethical thinkers in the different countries. Reason became the tool to search for the ultimate reality and human destiny. Basic religious ideas were laid down by which people have been living ever since. The fundamental categories within which we still think today were created. To give a name to this spiritual process, in 1949 the German philosopher Karl Theodor Jaspers coined the phrase "Achsenzeit" ("Axial Age" or "Axis age" in English) ⁶ The idea of an 'axial age' is somewhat marred by the fact Zarathustra, the founder of [Zoroastrianism](#), lived before the Axial Age. ⁷ He appeared in what is now Iran circa 1200 BCE. Also, such prominent figures as Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad came before or after the Axial Age. ⁸ This makes the Jasper's concept of the 'Axial Age' seem to be more of a helpful observation rather than a law of human history.

Jaspers distinguished four ages: the Neolithic age, the age of the earliest civilizations, the age of the emergence of great empires, and the modern age. ^{2,6}

- During their first and probably longest phase of their social evolution --the Palaeolithic phase -- people lived by gathering fruit and catching small animals; they gradually changed into hunters. These people had primitive theories explaining nature and fire and death, and some limited language for communication. The first major advance in human experience was the change from hunting to agriculture and cattle-breeding. This occurred in pre-historic times. We know very little about the social conditions that made the transition possible. The discovery of agriculture and the domestication of animals were possibly the most far-reaching changes in human history. They both apparently occurred eight or ten thousand years ago, at the beginning of the Neolithic era. There was only limited religious development at this time.
- The second major advance was the building of urban civilizations, apparently brought about under the leadership of the priestly ruling classes. There was a remarkable degree of technological and aesthetic innovation, which eventually began to produce a slow transformation of human beliefs. People began searching for comprehensive religious and ethical concepts.

Urban civilization was probably superimposed upon the peasant base first in Mesopotamia and Egypt during the fourth millennium BCE. For the next three thousand years, the history of Western civilization concentrated in this part of the world. People projected all authority upon the gods. The early civilizations were permeated with religion, a theocratic institution built around the temple of a tribal deity and ruled by a priest-king. As long as faith in theocracy remained unquestioned, there was a remarkable display of human inventiveness, creativity, and energy. The Summerians probably made more important contributions to our cultural heritage than any other people known in history. The early efflorescence was followed by a long period of cultural stagnation – an interval of nearly two thousand years passed before the advent of another bout of high creativity.

- The faith in the theocratic principle gradually declined. At the same time, trade and imperialism brought all the Near Eastern societies closer together, and their frequent contacts led to religious syncretism. At first, it was assumed that different peoples were really worshipping the same deities, though with different rituals and different names. [Religious intolerance](#) did not exist: Travelers in a foreign city could participate in local ceremonies with no feeling of disloyalty to their own ancestral gods. However, questions about divine justice brought about the first attempts to formulate a more enlightened morality and a greater realization of each person's responsibility for their own destiny. Religion began to evolve toward monotheism, even though the change in religious thought was inhibited by traditional beliefs. Science and technology made little advance, and the presence of magic and religiosity prevented arriving at any understanding of natural law.
- According to Karen Armstrong, the interval from the beginning of the Neolithic age to the first millennium BCE was a period of economic, social, and cultural evolution. At the beginning of this interval, people became capable of producing an agricultural surplus that gave an additional income. ⁹ The new wealth helped to create a society with a broader perspective; the old localized approaches to religion became seen as limited and parochial. Instead of worshipping pagan gods the tendency developed to worship a single and transcendent universal God. Also, people became more aware of social injustices.
- The first millennium BCE saw the creation of new values and of new views of life. Almost simultaneously, in different areas of the world, prophets and philosophers began to preach new doctrines which:
 - Recognized the spiritual freedom and independence of the individual.
 - Asserted the unity of mankind and the universe.
 - Asked fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence, and
 - Adopted a rational view of natural processes.

Attempts were made to answer these questions rationally. The Axial Age was born.

All the religious and ethical thinkers did not produce identical responses to these questions. Inner peace was the main concern in the East. The harmony of order and freedom was particularly important in the West. Even within each culture the spiritual responses were varied, even conflicting. However, the trends of the responses were inherently similar.

Consequences of the Axial Age:

Many consequences of what happened during the Axial Age, and as a result of it in its aftermath, are still in force today:

- People have become conscious of themselves and of their limitations. Their view of their position in the world changed fundamentally.
- Philosophy, and science emerged. People still think within the fundamental categories born in the Axial period.
- Attempts at reordering the world developed in most spheres of human existence, within competing [worldviews](#).
- Drastic changes in religious traditions occurred, often leading to a collapse of previously established systems of beliefs.
- The [major world religions](#), which humans still follow, were established. Each is unique in their own way.
- The civilizations that emerged after the Axial Age engaged in proselytizing to various degrees. This naturally led to [religious intolerance](#), concerning basic doctrinal and/or ritual premises. Religious orthodoxies became established. 4
- Accountability to a higher authority -- God, Divine law -- emerged. For example, the King-God was replaced by a secular ruler accountable to some higher order.
- The new abstract conceptions of deity became expressed indirectly in allegorical or poetic language.

In the words of Henry Bamford Parkes:

"If one extends the Axial Period forwards to include the development of Greek thought during the fifth and fourth centuries [BCE](#), and the preaching of the gospel ethics by the founder of [Christianity](#) in the first century [CE](#), it can be affirmed that no really new ideas have been added since that time." 2

If we add to his statement the contribution by [Islam](#), it appears that, during the past fourteen centuries, humanity has been living off the spiritual capital accumulated during the Axial Age. The development of science and technology since the seventeenth century CE led to a radical transformation of life for most people, and caused a different type of society to emerge in the West. However, it has not provided a radical change in material conditions comparable in importance to the discovery of agriculture, nor has it brought a major growth of new moral or religious ideas. 2

The great religious and cultural traditions that originated during the Axial Age may be coming to an end. There are three main factors that show a need for a radical change in religious beliefs:

- The rapid development of knowledge in the past few centuries in the natural sciences, social sciences, mental and human sexuality research, etc.
- Current religious beliefs are the product of millennia-old primitive thinking. Beliefs still bear the imprint of ancient cultures. They have to be updated to present-day realities. Unless they are overhauled, current religious values may disappear.
- Humanity's spiritual coming-of-age, which began during the Axial Period, is incomplete. This is scarcely surprising if the past few millennia are compared with the entire span of humanity's long evolution. According to Carl Sagan, in a million years there still will be a need for further changes and refinements in spiritual matters.

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The following information sources were used to prepare and update the above essay. The hyperlink is not necessarily still active today.

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