

Wyatt Bingham

World Humanities

December 25, 2010

### The Axial Age

By the time period from 700 BCE to 400 BCE much of humanity had coalesced into distinct and highly cohesive civilizations. Large urban centers had emerged and there was a great deal of specialization in occupations among the inhabitants of these civilizations. Most notably these peoples were geographically arranged around or near those places that are traditionally held to be the first post-neolithic locations; the Yellow River Valley, the Indus River Valley, the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the coastal areas of the Mediterranean Sea. In each of these elemental places there arose thinkers whose similar ideas have formed the basis of philosophical thought and religion that have persisted through history to the present era. So important were these new approaches to the great questions of humanity, many historians have referred to this period as “the Axial Age”, that is, the time when the course of history pivoted and shifted in new directions.

In China by the sixth century BCE, Taoism and Confucianism were well established. The possibly mythical figure Lao-tzu taught in the *Tao Te Ching* a systematic approach that sees everything with two sides; a light and dark, a right and wrong, an ignorance and wisdom in a search for a specific truth known as The Way (Tao). Confucius' writing, *The Annalects* lays out a series of teachings or lectures that are reminiscent of Proverbs from the Old Testament. Indeed, one of them sounds exactly like the “golden rule” of the Judeo-Christian tradition, (although Confucius would not have called it a rule.) His teachings were meant to instill ethical behavior in

his students for its own sake; a just and plentiful world would be the result of this intrinsic ethical code that would make the need for laws and rules unnecessary. So while Taoism and Confucianism were different in that one was an almost religious set of doctrines leading to a specific goal and the other is a code of right conduct, they both had meaningful and pervasive impact on Chinese and Southeast Asian culture down to the twentieth century.

Two of the great world religions, Hinduism and Buddhism had their beginnings during this Axial Age. With roots possibly as old as the Aryan migration into the Indian sub-continent, Hinduism had its beginnings with sacred texts known as the Vedas which were solidified around 700 BCE in the form of the Upanishads which are commentaries on the earlier works. Unique in this discussion, the Upanishads (and the Vedas) are not attributable to any specific person but a caste of scholarly religious interpreters of the texts. Most notable of these texts, *The Bhagavad Gita* details a conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, a warrior philosopher prince who is debating the wisdom of a battle about to begin. It is considered much more than a religious guide, but a practical manual for living one's life, even outside India and the Hindu faith. In the same region in the late fourth century BCE, Siddhartha Gautama, a known historical figure, was contemplating the reason for suffering (or discontent) in the world. After a long period of attempting to rid himself of all desires to end his suffering, he eventually came upon a “middle way” in which one neither indulges oneself or denies oneself, but seeks a path through life without greed, ignorance, hatred or any other dysfunctional emotions. This was distilled into The *Four Noble Truths* which summarize the (by then) Buddha's teachings. Although Hinduism and Buddhism developed in almost the same place and time, they tended to be complimentary rather than competitive. As a result, (Buddhism especially) they spread and flourished so that today about a third of the world's population adheres to one of these faiths, one more religious, the

other more earthly.

In the area known as the fertile crescent, what is today referred to commonly as the Middle East, by the Axial Age there were two well established faiths that would compete for followers. In the end though, the two monotheistic traditions of the Persians and the Hebrews would see a clear success for the later over the former. Zoroaster, (or Zarathustra) was an individual whose time has been disputed but who was certainly alive no earlier than the ninth century nor later than the sixth century BCE. Zarathustra saw life as the struggle between truth and a great lie. Ahura Mazda, the one god, although not all powerful, would in the end destroy the lie and the evil doers. The good life then is in worship of the one god and pursuing free expression which will reveal the truth of God and will in the end result in a life worth living. This monotheism and critical look at one's own life are considered strong predecessors to the Abrahamic tradition that would ultimately result in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Abraham is the prophet of the monotheistic god that these three great religions trace their ancestry. Although some theologians will disagree, most contemporary historians and theologians concur that the biblical references to Abraham are most likely contemporary references in the fifth or sixth century BCE, well within the Axial Age. All three faiths believe in one eternal god who created the universe, controls the course of history, reveals him or her self through prophets who write divine scriptures and is going to one day intervene in human history on a day of judgment. It can be said that this monotheism of the Middle East that reverberates in to modern European, American, Middle Eastern, Arabic and South Asian cultures are all part of a long cultural strand from the Babylonians to the Persians to the Hebrews to various faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam today.

If there is one philosophic strand from the Axial Age that permeates every aspect of the

modern world and every epoch that has existed in the interim, it is the Socratic philosophic revolution of the fifth century Greeks. Greek thinkers had been setting the stage for rationality, logic and reason for a century before Socrates, his eminent biographer Plato and his student Aristotle. Socrates, unlike his contemporaries, set aside the fascinating world of the fickle pagan gods and looked inward for the source of truth and beauty. All the answers are within oneself, and so, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” By questioning his students and any other Athenian citizen, Socrates insisted that ignorance would be overcome by asking the right questions. This clear rationality is the predecessor to modern science (some would say a religion of its own) and the distinct western philosophical tradition that led to the more modern sciences of archeology, anthropology, psychology and sociology. Socrates' student Plato conceived of perfect “forms” of real things of which we can only see the shadows because of our ignorance. And Plato's student Aristotle saw the need to apply inductive reasoning (a precursor to the scientific method) and classification to all things to promote deeper understanding. This clear, pragmatic approach has unquestionably produced the greatest philosophical and technological achievements of the modern world, down from the Axial Age. Though, like Jesus, to whom many comparisons have been made, Socrates did not leave a written word. The Western world has had to rely on “disciples” for their ultimate consideration.

And so, while it may seem strange that like the innovations of agriculture and writing, these systems of thought occurred at roughly the same time, approximately 25 centuries ago, it can not be debated that they form the intellectual and religious foundations of the modern world. Perhaps these things happen because the time is right, regardless of cultural differences. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that modern thinking and faith have their roots in the Axial Age. It can be wished that through the forces of globalization and light speed communication that the

people of various cultures will see not the differences that each civilization provides, but the stunning similarities in thinking and individual philosophies that the ancients of the Axial Age passed down to every culture. What cultures have in common is more important than what they have in contrast. The variations are ordinary, the similarities are astonishing.