

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. ³

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

Consequences of the Axial Age:

There are many consequences of what happened during the Axial Age, and as a result, 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

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/tomek26.htm>