

Reflections on an Age of Wisdom

We have been on quite a journey, you and I, these past 5 weeks. And I realize...I realize that not everyone here, today, has attended *all* of the previous lectures...and that for some of you today's lecture represents the first and the only of these lectures that you will have been able to attend. Nevertheless, you and I together—considered as a corporate body—we have travelled far and wide these past 5 weeks: beginning in China with Master Kung (also known as Confucius) as well as with Laozi, one of the key founders of what we today know as Taoism. We then moved to India first to encounter Siddhartha—the Buddha—and then, the following week, to learn about one of the classics of Hindu devotional literature: the Bhagavad Gita. Two weeks ago, we then made a dramatic shift from East to West...from Orient to Occident, first stopping in Greece where we explored the origins of the great Western philosophical tradition through the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and then last week for a further stop, this time on the other side of the Mediterranean, coming face to face with the Hebraic prophetic tradition, through the witness and the writings of a remarkable figure, that of the prophet Jeremiah. Like the man said at the outset: it's been quite the journey.

And it's a journey for which we very much have Karl Jaspers to thank. Jaspers was one of the commanding figures of twentieth century European philosophy. In 1949 Jaspers published a book of reflections on history: a book which came to be known—in the English speaking world—as *The Origin and Goal of History*. Although Jaspers, in the book, surveys wide swathes of world history—starting with the pre-historical societies and extending right through to the modern era—Jaspers' book is best known for its theory of an Axial Period, an Axial Age: in other words, the Age of Wisdom and of Wonder that this present lecture series has sought to explore. That age, according to Jaspers, began nearly 3000 years ago, roughly between 800 and 200 B.C.E. Jaspers argues that this 600 year period—in places as diverse as China, India, Persia and the Mediterranean—was a uniquely fertile period, giving “birth to everything which, since then, humanity has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity.”ⁱ

“Pre-Axial cultures”, writes Jaspers, “like those of Babylon, Egypt, the Indus valley and the aboriginal culture of China, may have been magnificent in their own way, but they appear in some manner unawakened....Measured against the lucid humanity of the Axial Period, a strange veil seems to lie over the most ancient cultures preceding it, as though humanity had not yet really come into being.”ⁱⁱ

By way of contrast, Jaspers insists that history—beyond the close of the Axial Age which he dates to the time roughly 200 years before the birth of Christ—subsequent history, according to Jaspers, continues to be shaped by the transformation that took place during the Axial Age. He writes: “Until today humankind has lived by what happened during the Axial Period, by what was thought and created during that period. In each new upward flight it returns in recollection to this period and is fired anew by it. Ever since then it has been the case that recollections and reawakenings of the potentialities of the Axial Period—renaissances—afford a spiritual impetus. Return to this beginning is the very-recurrent event in China, India and the West.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And it goes without saying that my task, this afternoon, is to try to draw together some of the themes that emerge during the Axial Age: themes common to the Axial experience in places as diverse as China and India, Judah and Greece. The delicacy of that task should not be underestimated, however. Jaspers himself, at the outset of his discussion of the Axial Age, makes it clear that we will go astray if we expect to find in the Axial Period uniformity of life and thought. On the contrary! As Jaspers explains:

“What is new about this age...is that human beings become conscious of Being as a whole, of humanity and its limitations. Human beings experience the terror of the world and their own powerlessness. They ask radical questions....Spiritual conflicts arise, accompanied by attempts to

convince others through the communication of thoughts, reasons and experiences. The most contradictory possibilities are essayed. Discussion, the formation of parties and the division of the spiritual realm into opposites which nonetheless remain related to one another create unrest and movement to the very brink of spiritual chaos.”^{iv} In short, as even Jaspers acknowledges, any unity we observe within the Axial Age may well have more to do with the questions that were being asked than with the answers that were being provided.

And surely those of us who have attended some or all of the previous lectures will have witnessed the diversity of those answers. Professor Nosco, in his opening lecture, made it clear that Confucius and Laozi—despite their historical proximity to each other—created very different systems of thought and very different ways of life. In the words of Confucius—words that may well have been aimed in the direction of the Taoist tradition: “I once spent a whole day without food and a whole night without sleep, in order to meditate. It was no use. It is better to learn.”^v Their common ground, notwithstanding, the Confucian and Taoist traditions are hardly the identical!

Much the same can be said of the Indian traditions. Viewed from the perspective of the West, there is, of course, a great deal of common ground between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Nonetheless, Siddhartha regarded himself as a reformer of the Indian religion into which he was born, a fact which—at a bare minimum—suggests that we will discover in the world of Indian religion the same sort of overlap (but also the same sort of dissonance) that we find in the West between Judaism and the religion founded by Jesus and Paul, both of whom—like the Buddha—sought to reform the religion into which they were born.

As for the West, those of you who were here a couple of weeks ago may recall my quip about Plato and Aristotle walking into a bar and bumping into Jeremiah! What would Jeremiah make of the two Greek philosophers? And what, pray tell, would those two Greek philosophers make of Jeremiah? But there’s more! Aristotle and Plato—twin representatives of what we call the world of ancient philosophy—were themselves so very different, a difference that their respective legacies make clear. To cite the two instances with which I am most familiar: one drawn from the world of theatre, the other from the world of Christian theology. Plato, in his most famous discourse—*the Republic*—insisted that the poets would be banished from his ideal society. Aristotle, for his part, wrote his work the *Poetics* precisely in order to demonstrate not only *that* Plato was wrong, but *why* Plato was wrong. Perhaps more impressively, it’s fair to claim that Christianity was born into an intellectual milieu shaped largely by Plato. In the Christian Middle Ages, however, Western Christendom (as the result of contact with Islam), rediscovered Aristotle: a rediscovery that not only changed the shape of theological discourse in the Western part of the Christian world, but which also (I believe) helps to account for the fact that the birth of modern science took place within the precincts of that *Western* Christian world.

To summarize: when it comes to the figures of the Axial Age, we dare not forget that the differences are every bit as important as the commonalities. But then what *can* be said...what can be said of their common ground? Beyond the fact that the great Axial figures were all wrestling with very similar questions, what truly can be said in terms of the *unified* contribution of the great figures who helped to give shape to this Age of Wisdom, this Age of Wonder?

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Theologian John Hick, in the Gifford Lectures he gave at the University of Edinburgh in 1986/7,^{vi} drew a broad contrast between religion prior to the Axial Age, and the great religious traditions that emerge during and after the Axial Age. According to Hick, Pre-Axial religion places a tremendous emphasis on the preservation of the “cosmic and social order,” an emphasis that gives a decidedly conservative (and a decidedly ritualistic) cast to Pre-Axial religion. That’s why the key

figure in so much pre-Axial religion is that of the priest, whose ritual performance is critical to the maintenance of the order of the world. John Hick contrasts that with Post-Axial religion, which is concerned with “a quest for salvation or liberation”. (Hick, p. 22) Mark Muesse, who teaches Religious Studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, provides a helpful summary of Hick’s basic notion: namely, that in the Axial Age “religion shifted from *cosmic maintenance* to *personal transformation*.”^{vii}

And the word I wish especially to draw to your attention, right now, is the word “personal”, because I believe it to be central to the shift that takes place during the Axial Age. Especially when the word “personal” is allowed to stand in sharp contrast with the word “cosmic”, a sense of the broad contours of the change that takes place during the Axial Age begins to emerge. To put the matter sharply: what we begin to find in places as diverse as India and China, ancient Athens and ancient Jerusalem, is the emergence of the distinctly human, which is to say the emergence of a sense (within growing pockets of the human community) of the profound dignity but also the inescapable responsibility that is attached not only to humanity considered as a whole, but especially to human persons in their unique singularity. At the risk of using a word about which many of us will have at least a few misgivings, the Axial Age is the Age that bequeaths to humanity its sense of the individual, the human person in the full measure of their grit and their glory. Human persons: bearers of great burdens, facing grave challenges, subject to immense suffering. Nonetheless, human persons: bearers of great dignity, gifted with at least a measure of freedom, confronting remarkable opportunities, undertaking significant responsibilities. There is a sense in which all of these themes emerge...emerge for the first time...during the Axial Age.

And I wish to take us more deeply into this theme—into this emergence of the human person—by way of introducing yet one more figure from the Axial Age, a figure who lived in yet one more civilization that participated in the Axial Age. By way of meeting this figure...a little bit of travelling music is in order!

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Those of you who are up on your classical music will no doubt recognize the opening movement of Richard Strauss’ *Also sprach Zarathustra*, a work that attempts to provide a musical tribute to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s most famous book. While we might debate the extent to which Strauss understood Nietzsche, and can definitely take issue as to whether or not Nietzsche had any real inkling (or even cared whether he had an inkling) of who Zarathustra really was, the title of that book is a reminder of an ancient figure about whom most of us have but a shadowy awareness. And yet Zarathustra—or Zoroaster—was the founder of a religion that not only influenced many other religions (including both Judaism and Christianity), but of a religion that is still practiced to this day, mainly by a small community of Parsis, most of whom live in and around the city of Mumbai in western India.

In fairness, it needs to be acknowledged that the reason Zarathustra remains a shadowy figure for most of us, is because his legacy is most definitely shadowed by great uncertainty, including uncertainties attached to the language in which his small corpus of writings is preserved for us. Traditionally regarded as a figure of the Axial Age, living sometime during the 7th century B.C.E., modern scholars are likelier to place him in a pre-Axial setting, a dating that makes Zarathustra a precursor to the Axial Age. Assuming that to be correct, and given the geographic centrality of Zarathustra’s Iran—a region with a deep connection with India to the East as well as with Judah and Greece to the West—the significance of Zarathustra’s thought cannot be overstated, either as an instance of the Axial Age or as a forerunner of the Axial Age. Indeed: the very fact that Zarathustra is traditionally held to have been a Priest—in other words, someone born into the older Pre-Axial order of things—highlights the fact that he exemplifies (with great clarity) the first stirrings of the Axial

transition from religions focused upon “cosmic maintenance” to religions focused upon “personal transformation”.

In many ways, the key word that ought to be associated with Zoroaster is a word we will meet often over the next twenty minutes: the word responsibility. Born into a violent age of rapid change and great social upheaval, Zarathustra’s response was to place a perhaps unprecedented emphasis upon the need for human beings to assume personal responsibility for *their* choices and actions. Zoroaster’s legacy, largely embodied in a small group of hymns that are credited to his authorship, is nowhere clearer than in these words from one of his most characteristic hymns:

In this hymn, Zarathustra speaks of their being “two Wills, twins who in the beginning made themselves heard through dreaming, two kinds of thought, of speech, of deed, the better and the evil; and between them well-doers discriminate rightly, but ill-doers do not. Once those two Wills join battle, a human being adopts life or non-life, the way of existence that will be his at the last; that of the wrongful the worst kind, but for the righteous one, best thoughts. Of those two Wills, the Wrongful one chooses to do the worst of things, but the most Bounteous Will (chooses) Right, he who clothes himself in adamant; as do those also who committedly please the Lord with genuine actions, the Mindful One. May we be the ones who will make this world splendid, Mindful One and Ye Lords, bringers of change, and Right, as our minds come together where insight is fluctuating.”^{viii}

All of the themes we generally associate with Zarathustra and the religion he founded are well-displayed in that hymn. The sense of duality...the sense that the world is caught between two radically different impulses, one leading to good, the other to ill...and the clear sense that human beings need to choose the good....All of that is embodied here. I love the closing line of that hymn! “May we be the ones...may we be the ones who make this world splendid!” In other words: may we take responsibility for the choices we make, choices that can either make of this world a place of horror, or which can make of this world a place of splendour. And if that kind of sentiment seems commonplace to you...if it’s the sort of thing you are accustomed to teach your children and grandchildren, realize at the time of Zarathustra such emphasis upon personal freedom (in other words, the freedom to choose) and personal choice (in other words, the decision to use one’s freedom well) was an utterly revolutionary emphasis, but one which we can observe in all of the subsequent figures of the Axial Age.

Let’s turn first to Confucius who, like Zoroaster, embodies the transition from Pre-Axial to Axial ways of thinking. Placing great emphasis upon the proper discharge of ritual duties, Confucius nevertheless shares Zoroaster’s emphasis upon the proper use of one’s freedom and thus, the proper undertaking of responsibility for one’s actions. Consider this classic statement from the *Analects of Confucius*: “The Master said, He who rules by moral force (*te*) is like the pole-star, which remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it.”^{ix} Or consider this classic formulation:

“Wealth and rank are what everyone desires; but if they can only be retained to the detriment of the Way they profess, they must relinquish them. Poverty and obscurity are what everyone detests; but if they can only be avoided to the detriment of the Way they profess, they must accept them. The noble soul who ever parts company with Goodness does not fulfil that name.”^x For Confucius, as for Zoroaster, single-minded devotion to the way of goodness is always paramount.

When we turn to the Taoist tradition, things get a wee bit more complex, because the central thrust of the earliest Taoist writings appear to be far more concerned with metaphysical questions than in providing practical guidance for men and women. And yet, within the key body of writings attributed to Laozi, we find this gem: “Live in a good place. Keep your mind deep. Treat others well. Stand by your word. Keep good order. Do the right thing. Work when it’s time. Only do not contend, and you will not go wrong.”^{xi} I’m sure both Confucius and Zoroaster would have approved.

Turning to India, we again find ourselves in terrain that might seem to go against the stream of this emphasis upon personal freedom, personal responsibility, and personal choice. After all: do not both Hindu and Buddhist metaphysics seem to suggest that the “self” we tend to take for granted in the Western World, is a far shakier construct than we like to imagine? While that is undoubtedly true, *neither* tradition fails to recognize the importance of the human person, nor the weightiness of the choices that person is called upon to make.

In the Hindu tradition, the Bhagavad Gita provides an especially provocative instance. The setting of the Gita is a battle, a battle in which the Prince Arjuna is called to act as a participant. Unhappy at that prospect, he seeks the advice of his charioteer, who just happens to be the Lord Krishna. As it turns out, the one thing Krishna does *not* say to Arjuna is that his choices on the battlefield are irrelevant since, after all, he will have as many future lives as he needs in order to get things right. On the contrary, Arjuna receives this instruction:

“Fulfill all your duties; action is better than inaction. Even to maintain your body, Arjuna, you are obliged to act. Selfish action imprisons the world. Act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit.” To which Krishna adds: “At the beginning humanity and the obligation of selfless service were created together. Through selfless service, you will always be fruitful and find the fulfillment of your desires: this is the promise of the Creator.”^{xii}

Much the same can be said of the Buddhist tradition, despite the fact that more than one school of Buddhist metaphysics goes so far as to deny the reality of the human “self”. Despite those metaphysical qualms, there is no denying the deeply personal nature of Siddhartha’s mission. After all, it was the sight of human suffering—human persons in deep anguish—that set the Buddha upon his path of discovery. Please note that he did not respond to such suffering as Lenin is said to have responded to the famine in the Ukraine: “If you want to make an omelette, you have to break a few eggs.” No: the Buddha’s initial impulse was to be deeply troubled by the sight of human selves who were enduring suffering, and he yearned to discover a way-out so that he could teach it to others. The point, of course, is that Siddhartha lived not as a metaphysician, but as a practical teacher of wisdom, one who was never shy about emphasising the need for his followers to make choices that embodied wisdom and integrity. In words that ought to sound very familiar by now, the Buddha—in the pages of a classic Buddhist text—is heard to say: “If you hold yourself dear, guard yourself diligently....Learn what is right; then teach others as the wise do. Before trying to guide others, be your own guide first. It is hard to learn to guide oneself. Your own self is your master; who else could be? With yourself well controlled, you gain a master very hard to find. By oneself is evil done; by oneself one is injured. Do not do evil, and suffering will not come. Everyone has the choice to be pure or impure. No one can purify another.”^{xiii} That’s a formulation that could come straight out of Zoroaster. Choose! Choose to be responsible for yourself and for your world.

When we turn to the key figures from the Western Axial age, much the same pattern can be discerned. Indeed: I think there is a strong case to be made in favour of the view that it is in Ancient Greece where we can most clearly discern the emergence of the human person. That person is certainly to be found within the pages of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, with its characteristic emphasis on the cultivation of excellence, the cultivation of the very virtues (temperance, prudence, courage and justice) that make it possible for persons to lead lives that are fully realized, in other words lives capable of bearing the full measure of human responsibility. A similar emphasis is, of course found in Plato: nowhere more so than in the beautiful dialogues through which Plato depicts the death of his beloved teacher Socrates, an inspired teacher whose refusal to compromise on his personal principles leads directly to his execution. And finally, half a century before Plato, one sees much the same emphasis in the Greek playwright Sophocles, whose heroine Antigone stands up to the power

of the State, rather than compromise her belief that there is an authority higher than the authority of the State, an authority to whom she owes her ultimate allegiance.

Ironically, the situation vis a vis the place of the individual—the human person—is less clear-cut in ancient Israel. Remember that the foundation of Hebrew piety is the covenant relationship God forges not with a person, but with a people. In the case of the prophet Jeremiah, not surprisingly, the bulk of his prophecies are directed toward the people Israel, not toward specific persons within Israel. And so while it is true that Jeremiah does occasionally dwell in the realm of personal ethics (“I, the LORD, search the mind and test the heart, requiting human beings for their conduct”)^{xiv}, it is perhaps at those moments in Jeremiah in which God deals directly with Jeremiah himself, that we witness the characteristic Axial emphasis upon the human person. Early in Jeremiah’s ministry, God comes to the prophet with a specific question. “The word of the LORD came to me” writes Jeremiah, and asked me “What is it that you see, Jeremiah?”^{xv} And the point, of course, is that part of Jeremiah’s education—part of what will make him capable of the prophetic responsibility that is about to be thrust upon him—is that he learn to see rightly and well, to notice the very things other people refuse to notice. Perhaps even more impressively, God informs Jeremiah at the get-go: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you for my own; before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”^{xvi} Here again, we witness the emergence of the human person, the responsible individual, as a central theme in the new self-understanding to which the Axial Age—in Iran, in China, in India, in Greece, in Judah—was persistently giving birth.

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Within the confines of this room—a room well-stocked with rugged individuals and no shortage of strong persons seeking to lead responsible lives, it’s likely impossible that we will not recognize something of ourselves in the Axial developments I have been outlining this afternoon. Hard not to recognize ourselves, and hard for us not to be cheered by those developments! We would be kidding ourselves, however, were we to pretend that there is not a shadow side to the legacy of the Axial Age.

Karl Jaspers was no stranger to those shadows. Aware, as he was, of the unique role Western science and technology were playing in reshaping the modern world, Jaspers was also aware of the extent to which the West’s distinctiveness ought not to hide the deep affinities it shares with the other great Axial centres in India and China: an affinity which, tragically, is nowhere more obvious than the history of encounters between Axial cultures with non-Axial people. Jaspers writes:

“People living outside the three regions of the Axial Period either remained apart or came into contact with one of these three centres of spiritual radiation. In the latter event they were drawn into history. In the West this happened, for example, to the Germanic and Slav peoples, in the East to the Japanese, Malays and Siamese. For many primitive peoples this contact resulted in their extinction. The outlines of the preceding civilizations dissolve. The peoples that bore them vanish from sight as they join in the movement of the Axial Period. The prehistoric peoples remain prehistoric until they merge into the historical movement that proceeds from the Axial Period, or die out. The Axial Period assimilates everything that remains.”^{xvii}

And, I must tell you: as a fan of the Star Trek television series, I find that last sentence especially chilling. “The Axial Period assimilates everything that remains.” As in the Borg; as in the words which define the Borg’s abiding promise: Resistance is futile, you will be assimilated.

German theologian Paul Tillich, in his treatment of the nature of “being”, argues that one of the inherent tensions within “being” is the tension between “individuation” and “participation”.^{xviii} By individuation, Tillich is referring to the process by which “beings” emerge from “being”: in other words,

the process by which a unique individual emerges from any species, but especially the way in which *human* individuals emerge from their participation not only in the human species, but in the life-of-the-world considered as a whole. There can, in other words, be no true individuality without a community in which individuals participate and gain their unique individual identities.

It needs to be stressed that each of the great founding figures of the Axial Age were deeply aware not only of the possibilities—but of the dangers—inherent in the process of individuation, in the emergence of the human person. Indeed, each of the great Axial figures we have considered these past six weeks, goes to great lengths to teach human individuals to participate responsibly in their communities and societies. From Zoroaster's emphasis upon choosing the good to the Buddha's emphasis on compassion; from Confucius' insistence upon life-long learning to Jeremiah's condemnation of evil in all of its manifestations; from the Bhagavad Gita's sanctioning of Prince Arjuna as a model for all who seek humbly to fulfill their duty to Aristotle's fashioning of an ethical system that explicitly seeks to help persons play their rightful role in the life of the polis, in the life of the city: each and every shaper of the Axial Age recognized the dangers of a process of individuation once that process turns in upon itself. How easily the quest for personal transformation becomes the ultimate ego-trip, in which transformation takes a back-seat while I fulfill my personal goals, apart from any awareness of the common good.

The irony, of course, is that the so-called primitive people—the people whose primal religions continue to bear echoes of pre-Axial ways with their emphasis not on personal transformation, but on cosmic maintenance—the irony is that it may well be just such pre-Axial echoes that we especially, at the present time, need to hear, with their emphasis upon “participation” rather than “individuation”. As that supreme chronicler of world religions, Huston Smith, observes: there may currently be a special need for us to learn from these primal religions, religions which well “may have retained insights and virtues that urbanized, industrial civilizations have allowed to fall by the wayside.”^{xix} In particular, Huston Smith points to the profound “embeddedness of primal peoples in their world”, an embeddedness which, of course, begins with participation in their *human* tribe but extends well beyond the tribe to include other living creatures as well as objects within the inanimate world.

My point is simply this. As those who have been moulded by an Axial culture, a culture which places a high premium upon the “individuation” side of Paul Tillich's polarity, we can do worse than to pay close attention to the way in which pre-Axial religions (including the pre-Axial religions of Canada's native people), encourage a deep solidarity with and a deep participation in the commons: a commons that includes the human, the non-human, and the trans-human. For such people the world, far from being a mere backdrop against which human beings pursue personal transformation, represents a sacred space without which no life (and thus no transformation) can even be conceived. And so, while it may be true that the great Axial religions and philosophies can teach us what it means to live a distinctly *human* life, perhaps it is the remnants of pre-Axial religion (including the wisdom embodied in the ancient traditions of Canada's First Nations people) which can alone help us to conserve this precious planet: the only planet with which any of us are personally familiar on which human life, as we know it, is presently lived.

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Having issued that rather sombre caveat, permit me to bring these remarks to a close on a somewhat more upbeat note. I referred earlier to theologian John Hick. Indeed, it is Hick's distinction between the pre-Axial emphasis on “cosmic maintenance” and the characteristic Axial-Age emphasis on “personal transformation,” that has given this lecture its basic shape. As I reach the end of my time with you, I want to return to Hick in order to make one final point: one that may come as a bit of a surprise, namely this. Hick believes (and I think he is entirely correct in this) that post-Axial religions, when contrasted with their pre-Axial cousins, exhibit a marked quality that Hick names as “cosmic

optimism"...cosmic optimism. Consider...consider the Axial Age's emphasis on "personal transformation" (transformation that hints at the possibility things may get better!) ...as opposed to "cosmic maintenance" (maintenance suggesting that what we've got is all we're ever going to get!). Consider that contrast, and perhaps you will begin to see that Hick's optimistic assessment of Axial religion is not all that far-fetched.

It's not just the personal nature of Axial religions and philosophies: it's that they truly embody a hope for transformation, a hope that is expressed in a variety of different ways but a hope that seems to be a pervasive dimension of the Axial age.

For Zarathustra, the ultimate reward for those who chose to follow the good rather than succumb to the evil, is to be rewarded with a life-beyond-this life: a life enjoyed in the companionship of the very God who had fashioned the good: a reward which, of course, finds echoes within the sacred scriptures of all three of the western world's monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In China, Laozi reminds adherents of the Way that "Tao endures. Your body dies. There is no danger,"^{xxx} an assurance that many of us will find all the more comforting precisely because it is expressed with such charming brevity. As for India, for all their differences, both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions are able to recognize the world's dangers, uncertainties and snares without relinquishing a grounded hope for personal liberation: liberation available to anyone prepared to enter into the rigours of their respective paths of enlightenment and growth. As for the Judaic tradition, the speed with which Jeremiah (after the fall of Jerusalem) turned from serving as a prophet of woe to a prophet of glad tidings, ought to serve as a reminder of the extent to which the wrath of Israel's God (of which both Old and New Testaments contain ample evidence) is a manifestation not of hatred but of love: a love which, on the one hand, refuses to settle for human cruelty and indifference but which, on the other hand, does not lightly give up on the human persons who find themselves on the receiving end of that love.

Nor should we assume that the non-religious philosophies of the Axial Period are devoid of such optimism. I can think of few thinkers as sober as Master Kung. Nevertheless, Confucius—in the pages of the *Analects*—speaks of the joys attached to a human life well lived. "To learn and at due times to repeat what one has learnt, is that not after all a pleasure? That friends should come to one from afar, is this not after all delightful? To remain unsoured even though one's merits are unrecognized by others is that not after all what is expected of a noble soul?"^{xxi}

Nor are such themes lacking in the Greek philosophers. I am struck by the myth of Plato's cave, found in the seventh chapter of Plato's *Republic*. Plato depicts the mass of human beings imprisoned in darkness; it is the role of the philosopher to awaken them, however, and to point them to the light. I am also struck by Aristotle's observation, in the first book of his *Ethics*, concerning the nature of the "good life". Such a life, according to Aristotle, must be measured in terms of the extent to which that life was shaped by virtue. But then Aristotle adds this insightful after-thought, namely that we can only really assess any of this 'in a complete life.' Why? Because, as Aristotle observes: "one swallow does not make a summer...and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy."^{xxii}

Aristotle's point, of course, is that the worth—the significance—of a human life needs to be measured on the basis of something far more substantial than a mere collection of peak experiences that may have occurred within the arc of that life. On the contrary, Aristotle recognizes that each human life tells a story...and we only fully understand the nature of that life and of the story it tells, when that life is assessed in its fullness, from start to finish, from its earliest beginnings, through to its completed destiny. Although encased within a framework that is explicitly philosophical rather than explicitly religious, I think it fair to suggest that Aristotle provides a potent hint of the remarkable vistas that open up when we are blessed to witness a human life well lived: lived with wisdom, lived in wonder. I, for one, delight in that.

At the risk of turning this lecture into a sermon, I would be remiss were I to conclude these observations without drawing a brief, closing connection between the Axial Age and the events many of us will be observing over the next five days, days which include remembrance of the death of Christ on Good Friday and the celebration of his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Jesus of Nazareth, it goes without saying, was born some 200 years after the generally agreed upon close to the Axial Age. Indeed: scholars and theologians continue to debate whether Jesus is best regarded as a teacher of wisdom or ought to be placed in some other category. I tend to be in sympathy with C.S. Lewis' assessment, namely that Jesus is best thought of as someone who drew upon *existing* wisdom (Lewis referred to that body of wisdom by its Chinese name; he called it the *Tao*)^{xxiii}, a body of wisdom largely drawn from a variety of texts reflecting the values and the virtues of the Axial Age. To the extent to which Lewis is correct, Jesus' achievement has less to do with anything distinctive in his teaching and more to do with what was distinctive in his living: namely his willingness (on the one hand) to exhibit profound solidarity with human persons, especially those in situations of suffering and marginalization and (on the other hand) to trust fully in the ultimate graciousness of the Mystery that surrounds us all, even in a situation that appeared to represent a hopeless dead-end.

My hope not only for this lecture, but for the entire series of which it has formed a part, is not that these lectures will have answered all of our questions concerning that Ultimate Mystery, but that together we will have been helped to ponder that Mystery more fully: and in a way that will quicken our determination to live more freely, more thoughtfully, above all more compassionately: trusting that we are held by a Love more gracious than any of us can even begin to imagine.

You have been a patient...and a gracious audience. Thank you!

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ⁱ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 1.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 2

^v *Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, XV:30

^{vi} John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

^{vii} Professor Muesse's lectures on the Axial are available in video format through The Teaching Company. They are entitled: "Religions of the Axial Age: An Approach to the World's Religions".

^{viii} *Hymns of Zoroaster*, 30: 3-9

^{ix} *Analects*, II:22

^x *Ibid.*, IV:17

^{xi} *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss & Stanley Lombardo, #8.

^{xii} *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Eknath Eawasan, 3: 8-10.

^{xiii} *Dhammapada*, trans. Eknath Eawasan, 12: 157-165.

^{xiv} *Jeremiah*, 17:10

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 1:11ff

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 1:5

^{xvii} Jaspers, pp. 7&8.

^{xviii} Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 174-7

^{xix} Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 366.

^{xx} *Tao Te Ching*, 16

^{xxi} *Analects*, 1:1

^{xxii} *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, Book I, chapter 7

^{xxiii} Lewis discusses this concept in his book, *The Abolition of Man*, including numerous illustrations which he gathers in the appendix to the book.