

The Buddha had always discouraged the cult of personality and had tirelessly deflected the attention of his disciples from himself to the message and method that he taught. Devotion to a human being could be a “fetter” that encouraged unenlightened habits of dependence and attachment. In the centuries that followed his death, Buddhists would have felt it unseemly to honour a statue of the Buddha, because he had “gone” into the bliss of *nibbana*. But the icons of the Buddha would become very important. When they looked at the serenity and fulfilment of his face, people became aware of what a human being could become. He was an image of enlightened humanity, so suffused with the ineffable *nibbana* that he was identical with it. In an important sense, therefore, he was *nibbana*, and expressed the transcendent reality in a human form.

By this time, Buddhism had split into two separate schools, both regarded as authentic versions of the faith. Historically there has been little animosity or rivalry between the two. The more austere and monastically inclined Theravada retired from the world, and sought enlightenment in solitude. The Mahayana was more democratic and emphasized the virtue of compassion. They pointed out that the Buddha had returned to the marketplace after his enlightenment and worked for forty years to show people how to deal with the ubiquitous pain of life. In the first century CE, this gave rise to a new Buddhist hero: the bodhisattva, a person who was on the brink of achieving enlightenment. Instead of disappearing into the bliss of *nibbana*, however, the bodhisattvas sacrificed their own happiness for the sake of the people and returned to the world of samsara to teach other people to find liberation. They were not unlike the saviour gods of *bhakti*, who descended from heaven to help suffering humanity. As this first-century text explained, the bodhisattvas were not interested in achieving a privatized *nibbana*.

On the contrary, they have surveyed the highly painful world of being, and yet desirous of winning supreme enlightenment, they do not tremble at birth-and-death. They have set out for the benefit of the world, for the ease of the world, out of pity for the world. They have resolved: “We will become a shelter for the world, the world’s place of rest, the final relief of the world, islands of the world, lights of the world, and the guides of the world’s means of salvation.”<sup>34</sup>

The bodhisattva was a new model of compassion, one that translated the old ideal of the Axial Age into a new form.

The Jewish Axial Age had been cut short, stifled, perhaps prematurely, by the difficulties of dispersion and resettlement, but it was brought to fulfilment by marvellous secondary and tertiary flowerings. During the first century CE, when the Holy Land had been occupied by the Roman empire, the country was in turmoil. A group of political Jewish zealots fiercely opposed Roman rule and in 66 CE orchestrated a rebellion that, incredibly, held the Roman armies at bay for four years. Fearing that it would spread to the Jews of the diaspora, the Roman authorities crushed the insurgency mercilessly. In 70 CE, the emperor Vespasian conquered Jerusalem and burned the temple to the ground. This second destruction was a bitter blow, but, with hindsight, it seems that the Jews of Palestine, who tended to be more conservative than the diaspora Jews, had already prepared themselves for the disaster. The Essenes and the Qumran sect had already withdrawn from mainstream society, believing that the Jerusalem temple was corrupt; their purified community would be a new temple of the spirit. They had imbibed the apocalyptic piety that had developed after the Axial Age and, like the Zoroastrians, looked forward to a great battle at the end of time between the children of light and the children of darkness, internalizing the violence of their time and giving it sacred endorsement.

But the most progressive Jews in Palestine were the Pharisees, who developed some of the most inclusive and advanced spiritualities of the Jewish Axial Age. They believed that the whole of Israel was called to be a holy nation of priests and that God could be experienced in the humblest home as well as in the temple. He was present in the smallest details of daily life, and Jews could approach him without elaborate ritual. They could atone for their sins by acts of loving-kindness rather than animal sacrifice. Charity was the most important commandment of the law. Perhaps the greatest of the Pharisees was Rabbi Hillel (c. 80 BCE–30 CE), who migrated to Palestine from Babylonia. In his view, the essence of the Torah was not the letter of the law but its spirit, which he summed up in the Golden Rule. In a famous Talmudic story, it was said that one day a pagan approached Hillel and promised to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied simply: “What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn it.”<sup>35</sup>

The Pharisees wanted no part in the violence that was erupting de-

structively around them. At the time of the rebellion against Rome, their leader was Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, Hillel's greatest student. He realized that the Jews could not possibly defeat the Roman empire, and argued against the war, because the preservation of religion was more important than national independence. When his advice was rejected, he had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem hidden in a coffin in order to get past the Jewish Zealots who were guarding the city gates. He then made his way to the Roman camp and asked Vespasian for permission to live with his scholars in Javne, on the coast of southern Palestine. After the destruction of the temple, Javne became the new capital of Jewish religion. In Rabbinic Judaism, the Jewish Axial Age came of age.

The Golden Rule, compassion, and loving-kindness were central to this new Judaism; by the time the temple had been destroyed, some of the Pharisees already understood that they did not need a temple to worship God, as this Talmudic story makes clear:

It happened that R. Johanan ben Zakkai went out from Jerusalem, and R. Joshua followed him and saw the burnt ruins of the Temple and he said: "Woe is it that the place, where the sins of Israel find atonement, is laid waste." Then said R. Johanan, "Grieve not, we have an atonement equal to the Temple, the doing of loving deeds, as it is said, 'I desire love and not sacrifice.'" <sup>36</sup>

Kindness was the key to the future; Jews must turn away from the violence and divisiveness of the war years and create a united community with "one body and one soul."<sup>37</sup> When the community was integrated in love and mutual respect, God was with them, but when they quarrelled with one another, he returned to heaven, where the angels chanted with "one voice and one melody."<sup>38</sup> When two or three Jews sat and studied harmoniously together, the divine presence sat in their midst.<sup>39</sup>

Rabbi Akiba, who was killed by the Romans in 132 CE, taught that the commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" was "the great principle of the Torah."<sup>40</sup> To show disrespect to any human being who had been created in God's image was seen by the rabbis as a denial of God himself and tantamount to atheism. Murder was a sacrilege: "Scripture instructs us that whatsoever sheds human blood is regarded as if he had diminished the divine image."<sup>41</sup> God had created only one man at the beginning of time to teach us that destroying only one human life was equivalent to annihilating the entire world, while to save a life redeemed the whole of humanity.<sup>42</sup> To humiliate anybody—even a slave or a non-

Jew—was equivalent to murder, a sacrilegious defacing of God's image.<sup>43</sup> To spread a scandalous, lying story about another person was to deny the existence of God.<sup>44</sup> Religion was inseparable from the practice of habitual respect to all other human beings. You could not worship God unless you practised the Golden Rule and honoured your fellow humans, whoever they were.

In Rabbinic Judaism, study was as important as meditation in other traditions. It was a spiritual quest: the word for study, *darash*, meant "to search," "to go in pursuit of." It led not to an intellectual grasp of somebody else's ideas, but to new insight. So rabbinic midrash ("exegesis") could go further than the original text, discover what it did *not* say, and find an entirely fresh interpretation; as one rabbinic text explained: "Matters that had not been disclosed to Moses were disclosed to Rabbi Akiba and his generation."<sup>45</sup> Study was also inseparable from action. When Rabbi Hillel had expounded the Golden Rule to the sceptical pagan, he told him, "Go and study it." The truth of the Golden Rule would be revealed only if you put it into practice in your daily life.

Study was a dynamic encounter with God. One day, somebody came to Rabbi Akiba and told him that Ben Azzai was sitting expounding the scripture with fire flashing around him. Rabbi Akiba went to investigate. Was Ben Azzai, perhaps, discussing Ezekiel's vision of the chariot, which inspired the mystically inclined to make their own ascent to heaven? No, Ben Azzai replied.

I was only linking up the words of the Torah with one another, and then with the words of the prophets, and the prophets with the writings, and the words rejoiced, as when they were delivered from Sinai, and they were sweet as at their original utterance.<sup>46</sup>

Scripture was not a closed book, and revelation was not a historical event that had happened in a distant time. It was renewed every time a Jew confronted the text, opened himself to it, and applied it to his own situation. This dynamic vision could set the world afire.

There were, therefore, no "orthodox" beliefs. Nobody—not even the voice of God himself—could tell a Jew what to think. In one seminal story, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was engaged in an intractable argument with his colleagues about a point of Jewish law. He could not convert them to his point of view, so he asked God to back him up by performing some spectacular miracles. A carob tree moved four hundred cubits of its own accord; water in a conduit flowed backwards; the walls of the house

of studies shook so dramatically that the building seemed about to collapse. But Rabbi Eliezer's companions were not impressed. Finally, in desperation, he asked for a "voice from heaven" (*bat qol*) to come to his aid. Obliging the divine voice declared: "What is your quarrel with Rabbi Eliezer? The legal decision is always according to his view." But Rabbi Joshua rose to his feet and quoted the book of Deuteronomy: "It is not in heaven." The teaching of God was no longer confined to the divine sphere. It had been promulgated on Mount Sinai, and was therefore the inalienable possession of every single Jew. It did not belong to God any more, "so we pay no attention to a *bat qol*."<sup>47</sup>

The rabbis fully accepted the Axial principle that the ultimate reality was transcendent and ineffable. Nobody could have the last word on the subject of God. Jews were forbidden to pronounce God's name, as a powerful reminder that any attempt to express the divine was so inadequate that it was potentially blasphemous. The rabbis even warned Israelites not to praise God too frequently in their prayers, because their words could only be defective. When they spoke of God's presence on earth, they were careful to distinguish those traits of God that he allowed us to see from the divine mystery that would always be inaccessible to us. They liked to use such phrases as the "glory" (*kavod*) of God; the "Shekhinah," the divine presence; and the "Holy Spirit" rather than "God" *tout court*, as a constant reminder that the reality they experienced did not correspond to the essence of the Godhead. No theology could be definitive. The rabbis frequently suggested that on Mount Sinai, each of the Israelites had experienced God differently. God had, as it were, adapted himself to each person "according to the comprehension of each."<sup>48</sup> What we call "God" was not the same for everybody. Each of the prophets had experienced a different "God," because his personality had influenced his conception of the divine. This profound reticence would continue to characterize Jewish theology and mysticism.

Christianity began as another of the first-century movements that tried to find a new way of being Jewish. It centred on the life and death of a Galilean faith healer who was crucified by the Romans in about 30 CE; his followers claimed that he had risen from the dead. They believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited Jewish messiah, who would shortly return in glory to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. He was the "son of God," a term they used in the Jewish sense of somebody who had been assigned a special task by God and enjoyed a privileged intimacy with him. The ancient royal theology had seen the king of Israel as the son and servant of Yahweh; the suffering servant in Second Isaiah,

who was associated with Jesus, had also suffered humiliation for his fellow humans and had been raised by God to an exceptionally high status.<sup>49</sup> Jesus had no intention of founding a new religion and was deeply Jewish. Many of his sayings, recorded in the gospel, were similar to the teachings of the Pharisees. Like Hillel, Jesus taught a version of the Golden Rule.<sup>50</sup> Like the rabbis, he believed that the commandments to love God with your whole heart and soul and your neighbour as yourself were the greatest *mitzvot* of the Torah.<sup>51</sup>

The person who made Christianity a gentile religion was Paul, the first Christian writer, who believed that Jesus had also been the messiah, the anointed one (in Greek, *christos*). Paul was a diaspora Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia; a former Pharisee, he wrote in koine Greek. Bridging both worlds, he was convinced that he had a mission to the *goyim*, the foreign nations: Jesus had been a messiah for the gentiles as well as the Jews. Paul had the universal—"immeasurable"—vision of the Axial Age. God felt "concern for everybody." He was convinced that Jesus' death and resurrection had created a new Israel, open to the whole of humanity.

Writing to his converts in Philippi in Macedonia during the mid-fifties, about twenty-five years after Jesus' death, Paul quoted an early Christian hymn that shows that from the very beginning, Christians had experienced Jesus' mission as a kenosis.<sup>52</sup> The hymn began by pointing out that Jesus, like all human beings, had been in the image of God, yet he did not cling to this high status,

*But emptied himself [heauton ekenosen]  
To assume the condition of a slave. . . .  
And was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.*

But because of this humiliating "descent," God had raised him high and given him the supreme title *kyrios* ("Lord"), to the glory of God the Father. This vision was not dissimilar to the ideal of the bodhisattva, who voluntarily laid aside the bliss of *nibbana* for the sake of suffering humanity. Christians would come to see Jesus as an *avatara* of God, who had made a painful "descent" out of love in order to save the human race. But Paul did not quote the hymn to expound the doctrine of the incarnation. As a former Pharisee, he knew that religious truth had to be translated into action. He therefore introduced the hymn with this instruction to the Christians of Philippi: "In your minds, you must be the same as Christ Jesus." They must also empty their hearts of egotism, selfishness, and pride. They must be united in love, "with a common purpose and a common mind."<sup>53</sup>

There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first, but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead.<sup>54</sup>

If they revered others in this selfless way, they would understand the *mythos* of Jesus' kenosis.

Jesus was the paradigmatic model of the Christians. By imitating him, they would enjoy an enhanced life, as "sons of God." In the rituals of the new church, they made a symbolic descent with Christ into the tomb when they were baptized, identified with his death, and now lived a different kind of life.<sup>55</sup> They would leave their profane selves behind and share in the enhanced humanity of the *kyrios*.<sup>56</sup> Paul himself claimed that he had transcended his limited, individual self: "I now live not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me."<sup>57</sup> It was the old archetypal religion in a new Axial configuration, dominated by the virtue of love. Later Christians would set great store by orthodoxy, the acceptance of the "correct teaching." They would eventually equate faith with belief. But Paul would have found this difficult to understand. For Paul, religion was about kenosis and love. In Paul's eyes, the two were inseparable. You could have faith that moved mountains, but it was worthless without love, which required the constant transcendence of egotism:

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.<sup>58</sup>

Love was not bursting with self-importance, clinging to an inflated idea of the self, but was empty, self-forgetful, and endlessly respectful of others.

The gospels, written between 70 and about 100 CE, follow Paul's line. They did not present Jesus teaching doctrines, such as the Trinity or original sin, which would later become *de rigueur*. Instead they showed him practising what Mozi might have called *jian ai*, "concern for everybody." To the dismay of some of his contemporaries, Jesus regularly consorted with "sinners"—prostitutes, lepers, epileptics, and those who were shunned for collecting the Roman taxes. His behaviour often recalled the outreach of the Buddha's "immeasurables," because he seemed to exclude nobody from his radius of concern. He insisted that his followers should

not judge others.<sup>59</sup> The people who would be admitted to the kingdom would be those who practised practical compassion, feeding the hungry and visiting people who were sick or in prison.<sup>60</sup> His followers should give their wealth to the poor.<sup>61</sup> They should not trumpet their good deeds, but live gentle, self-effacing lives.<sup>62</sup>

It seems that Jesus was also a man of *ahimsa*. "You have heard how it was said: *Eye for eye and tooth for tooth*," he said to the crowd in the Sermon on the Mount, "but I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well."<sup>63</sup> When he was arrested, he would not let his followers fight on his behalf: "All who draw the sword will die by the sword."<sup>64</sup> And he died forgiving his executioners.<sup>65</sup> One of his most striking—and, scholars tell us, most probably authentic—instructions forbade all hatred:

You have heard how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good and his rain to fall on honest men alike. For if you love those who love you, how can you claim any credit? Even the tax-collectors and the pagans do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? You must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.<sup>66</sup>

The paradox "Love your enemies" was probably designed to shock his audience into new insight; it required kenosis, because you had to offer benevolence where there was no hope of any return.

The final flowering of the Axial Age occurred in seventh-century Arabia, when the prophet Muhammad brought the Qur'an, a divinely inspired scripture, to the people of the Hijaz. Muhammad, of course, had never heard of the Axial Age, but he would probably have understood the concept. The Qur'an did not claim to be a new revelation, but simply to restate the message that had been given to Adam, the father of humanity, who was also the first prophet. It insisted that Muhammad had not come to replace the prophets of the past but to return to the primordial faith of Abraham, who lived before the Torah and the gospel—before, that is, the religions of God had split into warring sects.<sup>67</sup> God had sent messengers to every people on the face of the earth, and today Muslim scholars have argued that had the Arabs known about the Buddha or Confucius, the

Qur'an would have endorsed their teachings too. The basic message of the Qur'an was not a doctrine—indeed, it was sceptical of theological speculation, which it called *zannah*, “self-indulgent guesswork”—but a command to practical compassion. It was wrong to build a private fortune selfishly, at the expense of others, and good to share your wealth fairly and create a just and decent society where poor and vulnerable people were treated with respect.

Like all the great Axial sages, Muhammad lived in a violent society, when old values were breaking down. Arabia was caught up in a vicious cycle of tribal warfare, in which one vendetta led inexorably to another. It was also a time of economic and material progress. The harsh terrain and climate of the Arabian Peninsula had isolated the Arabs, but in the late sixth century CE the city of Mecca had established a thriving market economy and its merchants took their caravans into the more developed regions of Persia, Syria, and Byzantium. Muhammad was himself a successful merchant, and delivered his message to the Meccans in an atmosphere of cutthroat capitalism and high finance. The Meccans were now rich beyond their wildest dreams, but in the stampede for wealth, old tribal values, which demanded that the community take care of the weaker members of the clan, had been forgotten. There was widespread malaise, and the old pagan faith, which had served the Arabs well in their nomadic days in the desert, no longer met their altered circumstances.

When Muhammad received his first revelations, in about 610 CE, many of the Arabs had become convinced that Allah, the High God of their pantheon,\* was identical with the God of the Jews and Christians. Indeed, Christian Arabs often made the hajj pilgrimage to the Kabah, commonly regarded as Allah's shrine in Mecca, alongside the pagans. One of the first things that Muhammad asked his converts to do was to pray facing Jerusalem, the city of the Jews and Christians whose God they were now going to worship. No Jews or Christians were required—or even invited—to join the new Arab religion unless they particularly wished to do so, because they had received valid revelations of their own. In the Qur'an, God told the Muslims that they must treat the *ahl al-kitab*, “people of an earlier revelation,” with respect and courtesy:

Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in the most kindly manner—unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing—and say: “We believe in that which has been

\**Al-lah* simply means “God” in Arabic.

revealed to us from on high, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto him that we all surrender ourselves.”<sup>68</sup>

This remained the policy of the Muslim empire long after Muhammad's death. Until the middle of the eighth century CE, conversion to Islam was not encouraged. It was assumed that Islam was the religion of the Arabs, the descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael, as Judaism was the religion of the children of Isaac and Jacob, and Christianity was for the followers of the gospel. Today some Muslims denigrate Judaism and Christianity, and some extremists speak of the Muslim duty to conquer the entire world for Islam, but these are innovations that break with centuries of sacred tradition.

Eventually Muhammad's religion would be called *islam* (“surrender”); “Muslims” are men and women who have made an existential surrender of their lives to God. This takes us immediately to the heart of the Axial Age. When Muhammad asked that his converts prostrate themselves in prayer (*salat*) several times a day, this was hard for the Arabs, who did not approve of monarchy and found it degrading to grovel on the ground like slaves. But the posture of their bodies was designed to teach them at a level deeper than the rational what *islam* required: transcendence of the ego, which prances, preens, and postures and continually draws attention to itself.

Muslims were also required to give a regular proportion of their income to the poor. This *zakat* (“purification”) would purge their hearts of habitual selfishness. At first, it seems, the religion of Muhammad was called *tazakkah*, an obscure word (related to *zakat*) that is difficult to translate: “refinement,” “generosity,” and “chivalry” have all been suggested as English equivalents, but none is entirely adequate. By *tazakkah*, Muslims were to cloak themselves in the virtues of compassion and generosity. They must use their intelligence to cultivate a caring and responsible spirit, which made them want to give graciously of what they had to all God's creatures. They must carefully observe Allah's bounteous behaviour to human beings by observing the “signs” (*ayat*) of nature:

The earth he has spread out for all living beings, with fruit hereon, and palm trees with sheathed clusters of dates, and grain growing tall on its stalks and sweet-smelling plants.<sup>69</sup>

By meditating on the mysteries of creation, Muslims must learn to behave with similar generosity. Because of Allah's kindness, there was order and

fruitfulness instead of chaos and sterility. If Muslims followed his example, they would find that their own lives had been transfigured. Instead of being characterized by selfish barbarism, they would acquire spiritual refinement.

The new religion enraged the Meccan establishment, which did not approve of its egalitarian spirit; the most successful families persecuted the Muslims, tried to assassinate the prophet, and eventually Muhammad and seventy Muslim families were forced to flee to Medina, some 250 miles to the north. In the context of pagan Arabia, where the blood tie was the most sacred value, this amounted to blasphemy. It was unheard-of to leave your kin and take up permanent residence with a tribe to whom you were not related. After their migration (*hijrah*), the Muslims faced the prospect of war with Mecca, the most powerful city of Arabia. For five years, they fought a desperate battle for survival. In pre-Islamic Arabia, warriors were merciless. If they had managed to conquer the Muslim community, the Meccans would certainly have exterminated every man, and enslaved every woman and child.

During this dark time, some of the revelations of the Qur'an instructed Muslims about conduct on the battlefield. Islam was not a religion of *ahimsa*, but the Qur'an permitted only defensive warfare. It condemned war as "an awesome evil," and forbade Muslims to initiate hostilities.<sup>70</sup> Aggression was strictly prohibited; there must be no preemptive strikes. But sometimes it was regrettably necessary to fight in order to preserve decent values.<sup>71</sup> It was permissible to defend yourself if you were attacked, and while the war lasted, Muslims must fight wholeheartedly, pursuing the enemy vigorously in order to bring things back to normal. But the second the enemy sued for peace, hostilities must cease, and Muslims must accept any terms that were offered.<sup>72</sup> War was not the best way of dealing with conflict. It was better to sit down and reason with the enemy, as long as arguments were conducted "in the most kindly manner." It was much better to forgive, and be forbearing, "since God is with those who are patient in adversity."<sup>73</sup>

The word *jihad* did not mean "holy war." Its primary meaning was "struggle." It was difficult to put God's will into practice in a cruel, dangerous world, and Muslims were commanded to make an effort on all fronts: social, economic, intellectual, and spiritual. Sometimes it might be necessary to fight, but an important and highly influential tradition puts warfare in a subordinate position. It is said that on returning from a battle, Muhammad told his followers: "We are leaving the Lesser Jihad [the war]

and returning to the Greater Jihad," the infinitely more momentous and urgent challenge to reform our own societies and our own hearts. Later Muslim law elaborated on these Qur'anic directives. Muslims were forbidden to fight except in self-defence; retaliation must be strictly proportionate; it was not permitted to make war on a country where Muslims were able to practise their religion freely; civilian deaths must be avoided; no trees could be cut down; and buildings must not be burned.

During the five-year war with Mecca, atrocities were committed on both sides, as was customary in the bloodbath of pre-Islamic Arabia. Bodies were mutilated, and after one of the Jewish tribes of Medina tried to assassinate the prophet and plotted with Mecca to open the gates of the settlement during a siege, the men of the clan were executed. But as soon as the balance shifted in his favour, Muhammad cut the destructive cycle of strike and counterstrike, and pursued an astonishingly daring nonviolent policy.

In 628 CE he announced that he wanted to make the hajj pilgrimage and invited the Muslim volunteers to accompany him. This was extremely dangerous. During the hajj, Arab pilgrims could not carry arms; all violence was forbidden in the Meccan sanctuary. It was even forbidden to speak a cross word or kill an insect. In going unarmed into Mecca, Muhammad was, therefore, walking into the lion's den. Nevertheless, a thousand Muslims chose to accompany him. The Meccans sent their cavalry to kill the pilgrims, but local Bedouins guided them into the sanctuary by another route. Once they had entered the sacred territory, Muhammad made the Muslims sit down in a peaceful demonstration, knowing that he was putting the Meccans in a difficult position. If they harmed pilgrims in the holiest place of Arabia, blasphemously violating the sanctity of the Kabah, their cause would be irreparably damaged. Eventually, the Meccans sent an envoy to negotiate, and to the horror of the Muslims present, Muhammad obeyed the directives of the Qur'an and accepted conditions that seemed not only to be dishonourable but also to throw away all the advantages that the Muslims had fought and died for. Nevertheless, Muhammad signed the treaty. The Muslim pilgrims were furious, and even though mutiny was narrowly averted, they started the ride home in sullen silence.

But during the homeward journey, Muhammad received a revelation from God, who called this apparent defeat a "manifest victory."<sup>74</sup> While the Meccans, inspired by the violence of the old religion, had "harboured a stubborn disdain in their hearts," God had sent down the "gift of inner

peace [*sakinah*]” upon the Muslims, so that they had been able to respond to their enemies with calm serenity.<sup>75</sup> They were distinguished by total surrender to God, and this separated them from the pagan Meccans and linked them with what we would call the religions of the Axial Age. The spirit of peace, said the Qur’an, was their link with the Torah and the gospel: “They are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, and then he strengthens it so that it grows stout, and in the end stands firm upon its stem, delighting the sowers.”<sup>76</sup> The treaty that had seemed so unpromising led to a final peace. Two years later the Meccans voluntarily opened their gates to Muhammad, who took the city without bloodshed.

In every single one of the religions of the Axial Age, individuals have failed to measure up to their high ideals. In all these faiths, people have fallen prey to exclusivity, cruelty, superstition, and even atrocity. But at their core, the Axial faiths share an ideal of sympathy, respect, and universal concern. The sages were all living in violent societies like our own. What they created was a spiritual technology that utilized natural human energies to counter this aggression. The most gifted of them realized that

THE RELIGIONS OF THE AXIAL AGE TODAY.  
WORLD POPULATION

Christian	1,965,993,000
Muslim	1,179,326,000
Hindu	767,424,000
Buddhist	356,875,000
Sikh	22,874,000
Daoist	20,050,000
Jewish	15,050,000
Confucian	5,067,000
Jain	4,152,000
Zoroastrian	479,000

if you wanted to outlaw brutal, tyrannical behaviour, it was no good simply issuing external directives. As Zhuangzi pointed out, it was useless for Yan Hui even to attempt to reform the prince of Wei by preaching the noble principles of Confucianism, because this would not touch the subconscious bias in the ruler’s heart that led to his atrocious behaviour.

When warfare and terror are rife in a society, this affects everything that people do. The hatred and horror infiltrate their dreams, relationships, desires, and ambitions. The Axial sages saw this happening to their own contemporaries and devised an education rooted in the deeper, less conscious levels of the self to help them overcome this. The fact that they all came up with such profoundly similar solutions by so many different routes suggests that they had indeed discovered something important about the way human beings worked. Regardless of their theological “beliefs”—which, as we have seen, did not much concern the sages—they all concluded that if people made a disciplined effort to reeducate themselves, they would experience an enhancement of their humanity. In one way or another, their programmes were designed to eradicate the egotism that is largely responsible for our violence, and promoted the empathic spirituality of the Golden Rule. This, they found, introduced people to a different dimension of human experience. It gave them *ekstasis*, a “stepping out” from their habitual, self-bound consciousness that enabled them to apprehend a reality that they called “God,” *nibbana*, brahman, atman, or the Way. It was not a question of discovering your belief in “God” first and then living a compassionate life. The practice of disciplined sympathy would itself yield intimations of transcendence. Human beings are probably conditioned to self-defence. Ever since we lived in caves, we have been threatened by animal and human predators. Even within our own communities and families, other people oppose our interests and damage our self-esteem, so we are perpetually poised—verbally, mentally, and physically—for counterattack and preemptive strike. But if we methodically cultivated an entirely different mind-set, the sages discovered, we experienced an alternative state of consciousness. The consistency with which the Axial sages—quite independently—returned to the Golden Rule may tell us something important about the structure of our nature.

If, for example, every time we were tempted to say something hostile about a colleague, a sibling, or an enemy country, we considered how we would feel if such a remark were made about us—and refrained—we would, in that moment, have gone beyond ourselves. It would be a moment of transcendence. If such an attitude became habitual, people could live in a state of constant *ekstasis*, not because they were caught up

in an exotic trance but because they would be living beyond the confines of egotism. The Axial programmes all promoted this attitude. As Rabbi Hillel pointed out, this was the essence of religion. The Confucian rituals of “yielding” were designed to cultivate a habit of reverence for others. Before an aspirant could undertake a single yogic exercise, he had to become proficient in *ahimsa*, nonviolence, never betraying antagonism in a single word or gesture. Until this was second nature, his guru would not allow him to proceed with his meditation—but in the process of acquiring this “harmlessness” he would, the texts explained, experience “ indescribable joy.”

The Axial sages put the abandonment of selfishness and the spirituality of compassion at the top of their agenda. For them, religion *was* the Golden Rule. They concentrated on what people were supposed to transcend *from*—their greed, egotism, hatred, and violence. What they were going to transcend *to* was not an easily defined place or person, but a state of beatitude that was inconceivable to the unenlightened person, who was still trapped in the toils of the ego principle. If people concentrated on what they hoped to transcend *to* and became dogmatic about it, they could develop an inquisitorial stridency that was, in Buddhist terminology, “unskilful.”

This is not to say that all theology should be scrapped or that the conventional beliefs about God or the ultimate are “wrong.” But—quite simply—they cannot express the entire truth. A transcendent value is one that, of its very nature, cannot be *defined*—a word that in its original sense means “to set limits upon.” Christianity, for example, has set great store by doctrinal orthodoxy, and many Christians could not imagine religion without their conventional beliefs. This is absolutely fine, because these dogmas often express a profound spiritual truth. The test is simple: if people’s beliefs—secular or religious—make them belligerent, intolerant, and unkind about other people’s faith, they are not “skilful.” If, however, their convictions impel them to act compassionately and to honour the stranger, then they are good, helpful, and sound. This is the test of true religiosity in every single one of the major traditions.

Instead of jettisoning religious doctrines, we should look for their spiritual kernel. A religious teaching is never simply a statement of objective fact: it is a programme for action. Paul quoted that early Christian hymn to the Philippians not to lay down the law about the incarnation, but to urge them to practise kenosis themselves. If they behaved like Christ, they would discover the truth of their beliefs about him. Similarly, the doctrine of the Trinity was meant in part to remind Christians that they could not

think about God as a simple personality, and that the divine essence lay beyond their grasp. Some have seen the doctrine of Trinity as an attempt to see the divine in terms of relationship or community; others have discerned a kenosis in the heart of the Trinity. But the object of the doctrine is to inspire contemplation and ethical action. In the fourteenth century CE, Greek Orthodox theologians developed a principle about theology that takes us to the heart of the Axial Age. Any statement about God, they said, should have two qualities: it must be *paradoxical*, to remind us that the divine cannot fit into our limited human categories, and *apophatic*, leading us to silence.<sup>77</sup> A theological discussion, therefore, should not answer all our queries about the ineffable deity, but should be like a *brahmodya*, which reduced contestants to speechless awe.

Centuries of institutional, political, and intellectual development have tended to obscure the importance of compassion in religion. All too often the religion that dominates the public discourse seems to express an institutional egotism: *my faith is better than yours!* As Zhuangzi noted, once people interject themselves into their beliefs, they can become quarrelsome, officious, or even unkind. Compassion is not a popular virtue, because it demands the laying aside of the ego that we identify with our deepest self; so people often prefer being right to being compassionate. Fundamentalist religion has absorbed the violence of our time and developed a polarized vision, so that, like the early Zoroastrians, fundamentalists sometimes divide humanity into two hostile camps, with the embattled faithful engaged in a deadly war against “evildoers.” As we have seen to our cost, this attitude can easily segue into atrocity. It is also counterproductive. As the *Daodejing* pointed out, violence usually recoils upon the perpetrator, no matter how well intentioned he might be. You cannot force people to behave as you want; in fact, coercive measures are more likely to drive them in the opposite direction.

All the world religions have seen the eruption of this type of militant piety. As a result, some people have concluded either that religion itself is inescapably violent or that violence and intolerance are endemic to a particular tradition. But the story of the Axial Age shows that in fact the opposite is the case. Every single one of these faiths began in principled and visceral recoil from the unprecedented violence of their time. The Axial Age began in India when the ritual reformers started to extract the conflict and aggression from the sacrificial contest. Israel’s Axial Age began in earnest after the destruction of Jerusalem and the enforced deportation of the exiles to Babylonia, where the priestly writers started to evolve an ideal of reconciliation and *ahimsa*. China’s Axial Age developed during the

Warring States period, when Confucians, Mohists, and Daoists all found ways to counteract widespread lawless, lethal aggression. In Greece, where violence was institutionalized by the polis, despite some notable contributions to the Axial ideal—especially in the realm of tragedy—there was ultimately no religious transformation.

Nevertheless, the critics of religion are right to point to a connection between violence and the sacred, because *homo religiosus* has always been preoccupied by the cruelty of life. Animal sacrifice—a universal practice of antiquity—was a spectacularly violent act designed to channel and control our inherent aggression. It may have been rooted in the guilt experienced by the hunters of the Palaeolithic period when they slaughtered their fellow creatures. The scriptures often reflect the agonistic context from which they emerged. It is not difficult to find a religious justification for killing. If seen in isolation from the tradition as a whole, individual texts in, for example, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or the Qur'an can easily be used to sanction immoral violence and cruelty. The scriptures have constantly been used in this way, and most religious traditions have disgraceful episodes in their past. In our own day, people all over the world are resorting to religiously inspired terrorism. They are sometimes impelled by fear, despair, and frustration; sometimes by a hatred and rage that entirely violates the Axial ideal. As a result, religion has been implicated in some of the darkest episodes of recent history.

What should be our response? The Axial sages give us two important pieces of advice. *First*, there must be self-criticism. Instead of simply lambasting the “other side,” people must examine their own behaviour. The Jewish prophets gave a particularly strong lead here. At a time when Israel and Judah were threatened by the imperial powers, Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah all told them to scrutinize their own conduct. Instead of encouraging a dangerous righteousness, they wanted to puncture the national ego. To imagine that God is reflexively on *your* side and opposed to your enemies was not a mature religious attitude. Amos saw Yahweh, the divine warrior, using Assyria as his instrument to punish the kingdom of Israel for its systemic injustice and social irresponsibility. After his deportation to Babylon, when the exiles had been the victims of massive state aggression, Ezekiel insisted that the people of Judah look into their *own* violent behaviour. Jesus would later tell his followers not to condemn the splinter in their neighbour's eye while ignoring the beam in their own.<sup>78</sup> The piety of the Axial Age demanded that people take responsibility for their own actions. The Indian doctrine of karma insisted that all our deeds have long-lasting consequences; blaming others without examining how our

own failings might have contributed to a disastrous situation was “unskilful,” unrealistic, and irreligious. So too in our current predicament, the Axial sages would probably tell us, reformation must start at home. Before stridently insisting that another religion clean up its act, we should look into our own traditions, scriptures, and history—and amend our own behaviour. We cannot hope to reform others until we have reformed ourselves. Secularists, who reject religion, should also look for signs of secular fundamentalism, which is often as stridently bigoted about religion as some forms of religion are about secularism. In its own brief history, secularism has also had its disasters: Hitler, Stalin, and Saddam Hussein show that a militant exclusion of religion from public policy can be as lethal as any pious crusade.

*Second*, we should follow the example of the Axial sages and take practical, effective action. When they confronted aggression in their own traditions, they did not pretend that it was not there but worked vigorously to change their religion, rewriting and reorganizing their rituals and scriptures in order to eliminate the violence that had accumulated over the years. The ritual reformers of India took the agon out of the sacrifice; Confucius tried to extract the militant egotism that had distorted the *li*; and “P” took the aggression out of the ancient creation stories, producing a cosmogony in which Yahweh blessed all his creatures—including Leviathan, whom he had slaughtered in the old tales.

Today extremists have distorted the Axial traditions by accentuating the belligerent elements that have evolved over the centuries at the expense of those that speak of compassion and respect for the sacred rights of others. In order to reclaim their faith, their coreligionists should embark on a programme of disciplined and creative study, discussion, reflection, and action. Instead of sweeping uncomfortable scriptures and historical disasters under the carpet in order to preserve the “integrity” of the institution, scholars, clerics, and laity should study difficult texts, ask searching questions, and analyse past failings. At the same time, we should all strive to recover the compassionate vision and find a way of expressing it in an innovative, inspiring way—just as the Axial sages did.

This need not be a purely intellectual campaign; it should also be a spiritual process. In these perilous times, we need new vision, but, as the Axial sages tirelessly explained, religious understanding is not simply notional. Many opposed the idea of a written scripture, because they feared that it would result in slick, superficial knowledge. A self-effacing, compassionate, and nonviolent lifestyle was just as important as textual study. Even Indra had to change his belligerent way of life and live as a

