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Christopher Peet. *Practicing Transcendence: Axial Age Spiritualities for a World in Crisis*

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Christopher Peet. *Practicing Transcendence: Axial Age Spiritualities for a World in Crisis*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Reviewed by Constance Wilkinson

This unusual and enlightening scholarly work by Christopher Peet draws our contemplative attention to what post-war German philosopher Karl Jaspers called "the Axial Age," a "span of several centuries from 800 to 200 BCE . . . constituting a dividing line or 'axis' between a long prehistory of human beings before and the emergence of a world history after." (p. 6)

Academic interest in the Axial Age has only increased with time, and did not, of course, begin with Jaspers. Peet quotes British translator of Buddhist Pali texts T. Rhys-Davis, who, in 1905, having pondered certain historical events that occurred in various geographically separated and culturally distinct societies (India, China, Persia, Egypt, etc.), noted a pattern, and wrote:

Suddenly, and almost simultaneously, and almost certainly independently, there is evidence about the sixth century BC, in each of these widely separated centers of civilization, *of a leap forward in speculative thought, of a new birth in ethics*, of a religion of conscience threatening to take the place of the old religion of custom and magic. In each of these countries, similar causes, the same laws regulating the evolution of ideas, had taken just about the same number of centuries to evolve, out of similar conditions, a similar result. (Emphasis mine.) Is there a more stupendous marvel in the whole history of mankind? Does any more suggestive problem await the solution of the historian of human thought? (p. 63)

The Axial Age is an age of sages — in Central Asia, Buddha, the enlightened one, "Sage (*muni*) of the Saka." It is an age of Hebrew prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. In Axial Age China, the "Hundred Schools," among them, Taoists, Confucians, Mohists, Legalists, Logicians, Yin-Yang cosmologists. (p. 161) In Axial Age India, the great Jain teacher and founder Mahavir, as well as the anonymous authors of the Upanishad texts, reshaping Hinduism. In Greece, a great gaggle of thinkers: cynics, skeptics, sophists, stoics; Platonists, Epicureans, Pythagoreans, et al.

Critics of the status quo. Dissidents. Revolutionaries. Visionaries. Peet refers to them as "*spiritual virtuosi*." Their appearance on earth creates a pivotal point in time. However, said pivotal point happened ~2500 years ago. That was then; this is now. Really, who cares? Why should we? As one fictional wag pointed out sneeringly, "Isn't the past just...*history*?"

Well, yes. But, more importantly, no.

Axial Age responsive spirituality occurred against the context of an "unprecedented growth in civilizational power," (p. 13) as characterized by:

a whole host of corresponding changes socially, economically, technologically, and politically. This dramatic change in living conditions is not a wholesale good change. If anything, it is the opposite for the majority of people: There is also an extraordinary increase in social inequality and injustice and oppression, in slavery, in warfare and military conquest and conscripted labor. In short, these changes cause widespread despair and anxiety. These centuries also witness an unprecedented increase in human suffering. (pp. 13-14)

Peet argues that we are in times of similar crises "due to globalization and massive technological advancement ushering in a time of unprecedented change." (p. 14)

Peet springboards his assertion of the relevance of Axial Age viewpoints, through an experience witnessing the hysterical meltdown of a 4-year-old child "Olivia," who saw a video simulation of the destruction that rising sea levels would cause, disastrously flooding coastal cities all across the globe. In response to her/our apparently inevitable doom, she became terrorized, hopeless, helpless. Others present attempted to distract her, to calm her, as she wailed pitifully, *"I don't want that to happen! I don't want that to happen!"*

Peet realized that Olivia's apparently irrational response to this global crisis was, in truth, rational and justified, while the response of adults was to minimize the threat and distract attention; Peet states that he sees distraction and denial as "the most widespread and understandable psychological response to our present global situation." (p. 3)

Put in other words, we notice psychological responses that are characteristic of trauma. Numbing. Avoidance. Trauma-driven psychological responses to our current avalanche of global crises dovetail with Jaspers' view of the Axial Age: "What is new about this age...is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, [becoming conscious] of himself and his limitations. He experiences the **terror of the world and his own powerlessness.**" (p. 79)

Not unlike the terror and powerlessness experienced by little Olivia.

The Axial Age's spirituality is born of chaos and misery: constant warfare, disease, social strife; conflict over resources; rigid social hierarchies in which dominance by the elite few depend on the oppression of the many; it was also born of greed for wealth from trade that fueled expansionism in Old World civilizations, especially along the Eurasian east-west axis during the first millennium BCE, an "unprecedented expansion of power at that time." (p. 99)

Axial age rebels and visionaries responded to these conditions and threat, to “criticize and evaluate the expansion of power as a dangerous evil that magnifies and enhances what is base, violent, selfish, and egocentric in human nature and propose an alternative, spiritual vision of a human nature transformed toward its highest goodness, which is selfless, non-violent, compassionate, and loving.” (p. 138)

Each envisioned certain specific alternatives to the current status quo; they were revolutionaries working separately on human evolution, a "moral revolution" (p. 8) in which "thoughts and actions become judged and evaluated according to higher moral and ethical standards" (p. 8) through teachings that began with a visionary individual and over time became hugely influential; some part of their new world vision could be key to solving the crises the world must confront today, according to Peet, and that seems to be the point.

In Chapter 3, “Karl Jaspers and the Axial Age”, Peet discusses in detail the recent explosion of scholarship concerning the Axial Age and summarizes Jaspers' characterization of it as “a spiritual revolution in consciousness, involving transcendence, inwardness, mystery, identity, the universal and the individual.” (p. 93)

In Chapter 4, “The Axial Age in Context: The Growth of Civilization and the Expansion of Power”, Peet presents a wider perspective on human civilization, discussing pre-history, the growth patterns of civilizational size and power, the transition from an age of power to an age of spirit, occurring through innovations: new ways of ruling, monetary innovations, increased literacy, and changes in ideology.

In Chapter 5, “Sociology of Axial Age Civilizations”, Peet discusses the origins and interrelations of the Axial Age, first, as seen in World-System light. He then discusses and describes each region separately: Axial Age China, Axial Age India, Axial Age Israel, Axial Age Greece, and ends with considering these civilizations comparatively.

In Chapter 6, “The Axial Road Not Taken: Spiritual Practices of Transcendence”, Peet, having thoroughly contemplated "what the Axial Age *virtuosi* were doing and saying, practicing and preaching, within the horizon of their own historical moment...[concludes that]...the Axial Age's distinctive contribution to world history is sustained, systematic, spiritual practice." (p. 221).

Peet goes on to explain in some detail the Axial Age spiritual practices of transcendence specific to each region. In China, among many schools, arose Taoist “Inward Training” and Confucian self-cultivation; in Greece, a tradition of *Askesis*, “spiritual exercises”; in Israel, prophetic guilds, spiritual communities observing sustained spiritual practices and rules of behavior.

As to Axial Age spiritual practice in India: ascetic renunciation, choosing to renounce the ordinary world and live either as an anchorite or a mendicant. Anchorites live in the jungle, eating what roots and nuts and edibles they find, never eating food grown in a village, never setting foot in a village, never cutting their hair, never stepping a foot on plowed land. Mendicants own little beyond a begging-bowl and a garment for privacy. They may enter a village, once a day, to beg alms. (p. 228) They must “refrain from injuring seeds; treat all creatures alike, whether they cause him harm or treat him with kindness.” (p. 212)

Renunciation here is radical in that it represents “*a total rejection and reversal of the value system of the world.*” (p. 240) Peet reminds us that:

every step of the ascetic process could be described in terms of critique: critique of societal values, which means one must live differently; critique of inherited and taken for granted moral and ethical rules followed unthinkingly, which means one must perform these self-consciously and intentionally; critique of our untrained bodily comportment, which means one must train it; critique of our undisciplined mind, which means one must discipline it; and critique of our very self, which means one must transcend it. (p. 240)

And what is it that these renunciants do all day? They practice yoga. They practice meditation. They work on changing their states, not political states, but their own states of mind, wishing to change their minds for the better, the broader, the wider, the wiser.

Peet quotes scholar Daniel Brown, who states:

Despite the apparent differences across traditions of meditation, there is strong evidence of for a single underlying invariant sequence of stages. These stages represent a predictable progression of changes in psychological structure and are experienced subjectively as a systematic unfolding of distinct states of consciousness. This underlying path is best conceptualized as *a systematic deconstruction of the structures of ordinary waking consciousness.*” (p. 241)

They are doing so through actual spiritual practice — Lather, rinse, repeat; learning to generate compassion; learning to tame one's mind; following instructions to the letter, not just absorbing and parroting theories but putting them into practice. Spirituality practiced through actions.

Accumulating compassion instead of heaping up piles of sparkly flashy objects? Accumulating merit instead of power and control? Trading oppressive domination for mental equanimity and evenness? Swapping rage for lovingkindness? Trading in fear for fearlessness?

And that does seem to be what Peet advises. “Decentering from our habitual default egocentrism not only has the good consequence of increasing our psychological resilience, it also surprisingly reframes and, most importantly, re-scales our concerns.” (p. 18)

Thank you, author Peet.

Where shall we take it from here? It's up to us, our world, up to each of us, is it not?
Realizing ego-centrism as the enemy?
Taming body, taming mind?
Giving up clinging to ego?
Now, *that's* radical!