

WELLSPRINGS OF OUR FAITH TRADITION: WISDOM FROM THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

A Second Sunday Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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There's a fascinating story behind the origin of Lao Tse's masterpiece of wisdom titled the *Tao Te Ching* from which we just read. The factual accuracy of this legend cannot be proved or disproved, but it seems to capture the essence of his character and his times. Toward the end of his life, the Old Master (which is the literal meaning of his "name") decided to leave China. Some say he had grown deeply disenchanted with Chinese society and his personal prospects there. Others say that he left in pursuit of further wisdom, perhaps headed toward India. In any event, when he reached the western border of China, he was confronted by a customs official who demanded an export license for his possessions.

"Lao Tse had nothing with him, and explained that all he possessed was his philosophy, and that was in his mind. The customs inspector said that in that case he would have to leave his wisdom in China before departing, so Lao Tse sat at the border for three days and wrote down the *Tao Te Ching*. The book is so succinct that it could easily have been written in three days, and could be read in half an hour." [Frederic Spiegelberg, "The Old Man and His Book," in Charles Eastman (ed.), *The Ways of Religion*, p. 202] By the same token, deciphering the multiple layers of Lao Tse's little masterpiece has occupied the attention of scholars and spiritual seekers for more than 2500 years since then.

Lao Tse lived during an enormously fertile period in human history—a time that has come to be known as the Axial Period, because it represented a major turning point in human thought. "From about 900 to 200 BCE, in four distinct regions, the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity came into being: Confucianism and Taoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece. This was the period of the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads [in Hinduism], Mencius, and Euripedes. During this period of intense creativity, spiritual and philosophical geniuses pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience. Many of them worked anonymously, but others became luminaries who can still fill us with emotion because they show us what a human being should be." Historian of religion Karen Armstrong has recently written a *tour de force* interpretation of this pivotal period titled *The Great Transformation*. In her opinion, later (and larger) faith traditions such as Christianity and Islam were simply "latter-day flowerings of the Axial Age." [Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, p. xii]

Armstrong's book not only casts new light on the ideas born in this period, but more importantly on the **relevance of these ideas for our present time**. "The Axial sages," she says, "have an important message for our time, but their insights will be surprising—even shocking—to many who consider themselves religious today. It is frequently assumed, for example, that faith is a matter of believing certain creedal propositions. Indeed, it is common to call religious

people ‘believers,’ as though assenting to the articles of faith were their chief activity. But most of the Axial philosophers had no interest whatever in doctrine or metaphysics. . . . If the Buddha or Confucius had been asked whether he believed in God, he would probably have winced slightly and explained—with great courtesy—that this was not an appropriate question. If anybody had asked [the Hebrew prophets] Amos or Ezekiel if he was a ‘monotheist,’ who believed in only one God, he would have been equally perplexed. Monotheism was not the issue.” [Armstrong, p. xiii]

So if one’s **beliefs** were not the central issue for the sages of the Axial period, what **were** the more important issues? The short version of Armstrong’s answer to that question is this: First, “It was essential to question everything and to test any teaching empirically, against your personal experience.” Second, “What mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level. . . . The only way you could encounter what they called ‘God,’ ‘Nirvana,’ ‘Brahman,’ or the ‘Way’ was to live a compassionate life. . . . All the sages preached a spirituality of empathy and compassion; they insisted that people must abandon their egotism and greed, their violence and unkindness. . . . Each tradition developed its own formulation of the Golden Rule: do not do to others what you would not have done to you. As far as the Axial sages were concerned, respect for the sacred rights of other beings—not orthodox belief—was religion. If people behaved with kindness and generosity to their fellows, they could save the world.” [Armstrong, pp. xiii-xiv]

Lest we think that the Axial period was an idyllic era of peace and harmony, Karen Armstrong reminds us that “the Axial sages developed their compassionate ethic in horrible and terrifying circumstances.” [p. 397] The Hebrew prophets cried out to their countrymen at a time when the kingdom of Israel, which had presumably been sanctioned by almighty Jehovah, was soon to be overwhelmed by the foreign powers of Assyria and Babylon, and its people sent into exile in a foreign land. China at the time of Confucius and Lao Tse was wracked with violent strife among warring feudal states. In India, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is widely regarded as the greatest expression of Hindu devotional spirituality, was set in the context of a deadly battle between rival factions of an extended family—cousins killing cousins. In Greece, the brilliant career and tragic death of Socrates was set within the context of the ill-advised invasion of the Peloponnesian War. To summarize, **great spiritual breakthroughs take place at times of great crisis and uncertainty.**

Are we living in such a time? **Quite possibly.** We are living in a time when the deadly consequences of religious exclusivism and hatred are too obvious for anyone to ignore. We live in a time when the forced union of religion and politics has disastrous consequences. There is a disturbing parallel between the attempts of Islamic fundamentalists to gain control of Middle Eastern governments and the attempts of Christian fundamentalists to gain control of government in this country. Fortunately, our citizens have demonstrated the willingness to draw the line on religious control of government. In our local area that line is often blurred, and so we must remain vigilant and active in maintaining the boundary between church and state. One recent inspiring example is the success of parents who demanded an alternative to the Weekday Religious Education program in public schools for their children.

We are living in a time of global consciousness. Anyone who watches CNN is intensively aware of what is happening all around the world. We are linked to these events for better or worse. “The sages [of the Axial Age] were ahead of us in recognizing that sympathy cannot be confined to our own group. We must cultivate what the Buddhists call an ‘immeasurable’ outlook that extends to the ends of the earth, without excluding a single creature from this radius of concern. The Golden Rule reminded the fledgling individuals of the Axial Age that I value my own self as much as yours. If I made my individual self an absolute value, human society would become impossible, so we must learn to ‘yield’ to one another. Our challenge is to develop this insight and give it global significance.” [Armstrong, 398]

Are all religions saying essentially the same thing? This is a question that Unitarian Universalists must answer, not only for themselves but also in response to those who ask, What do you believe? The answer, I think, is Yes and No. The answer is No in terms of **beliefs**, and the particular stories that underlie those beliefs, which are based on the unique lives of the founders and how their followers interpreted their life and teachings. Beliefs **divide** one tradition from another. On the other hand, behavioral values **unite** diverse traditions. As Karen Armstrong reminds us, “Like us, [the sages of the Axial period] were conscious of the void and the abyss. The sages were not utopian dreamers but practical [people]; many were preoccupied with politics and government. They were convinced that empathy did not just sound edifying, but actually worked. Compassion and concern for everybody was the best policy. We should take their insights seriously, because they were the experts. They devoted a great deal of time and energy to thinking about the nature of goodness. They spent as much creative energy seeking a cure for the spiritual malaise of humanity as scientists today spend trying to find a cure for cancer.” [Armstrong, p. 397]

The challenge that faces us is first of all to **learn what the major religious traditions are saying**. Many UUs insist on the validity of the world’s religions without really knowing what each of them is actually expressing in terms not so much of beliefs but **behaviors**. And the second challenge is to adopt—indeed to insist on—a **global** perspective on religious matters. Such a perspective helps us look for **similarities** rather than differences between our faith tradition and others. As Huston Smith says at the end of his classic study of the world’s religions, “Things are more integrated than they seem, they are better than they seem, and they are more mysterious than they seem. Something like this emerges as the **highest** common denominator of the wisdom traditions’ reports.” [*The World’s Religions*, p. 389] In the words of Rabindranath Tagore:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

[quoted in *Singing the Living Tradition*, # 529]