

PREFACE

The Age of the Sages is unlike most other introductory books in the study of religion. Most foundational religious-studies texts approach their subject in one of a few basic ways. Some works focus on a single tradition, such as Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity. Books of this sort usually unfold chronologically, starting from the tradition's inauguration (or shortly before) and proceeding historically to the present. The advantage of this general method is that it permits the study of a single religious tradition in some depth. If the book's approach is chronological, it adds the very important dimension of showing how a religion evolves over time. Without a historical perspective, one might be led to think that religious traditions are relatively static and that devotees of a particular religion believe and practice the same things. As someone whose job is to interpret religions, I am frequently asked questions such as "What do Hindus believe?" The truest answer one can give to a question like that is that Hindus believe and have believed many different things throughout their history.

The same answer, of course, could be offered for all the world's major religions. Thus, one of the dangers in not taking historical development into account is that the great diversity manifested in all religions gets neglected. Focusing on the evolution of a single tradition can avoid that pitfall. The disadvantage to the single-tradition approach, however, is that it rarely allows for comparisons with other religions. Without the comparative dimension, one might be misled into believing that a particular religious tradition is completely unique or that it develops independently of other domains of culture or other religions. The comparative method ensures that a religious tradition is interpreted against the larger background of human experience beyond the particular religion under study.

Another kind of religious-studies text takes the comparative approach seriously but in so doing sacrifices much of the depth one gains from studying

the historical development of a single tradition. Many textbooks for introductory courses in world religions are structured in this manner. Such books are designed for courses in which one might spend the first two weeks on Hinduism, then two weeks on Buddhism, two days on Jainism, a week for the Sikhs, three weeks on Chinese religions, and so forth. The benefit of this method is the opportunity it affords to study traditions side by side to see how they differ and compare. It is difficult truly to understand any religion—including, and perhaps especially, one's own—without such comparisons and contrasts. In the same way that studying another language enables one to recognize the taken-for-granted features of one's native tongue, so too does the comparative study of religions bring to consciousness the dimensions of religious belief and practice that usually escape our notice. One might be tempted to think that all religions posit the existence of a creator god until one encounters a tradition like Buddhism, in which belief in god plays no role in accounting for the existence of the universe. Similarly, one could assume that Jesus originated the Golden Rule until one finds that Confucius uttered essentially the same principle five centuries earlier. In the words of Max Müller, one of the first comparativists of religion, "He who knows one, knows none."¹

But the problem with the comparative approach of most textbooks is that each religion receives such short shrift that its treatment is often shallow and its historical development is glossed over or insufficiently addressed. Furthermore, the religion's evolution in the larger context of its culture can be easily neglected. Thus, one fails to see how traditions are related to other aspects of their social setting, such as art, economics, politics, and education. Because it lacks adequate attention to historical development, this two-weeks-per-religion approach can also disregard the ways in which religious traditions frequently influence and shape one another. This is also a pitfall of the single-tradition method. In fact, one of the least appreciated aspects of the world's religions is the extensive ways in which they interact. To cite some small examples: Prayer beads seem to have originated among the Hindus and have been since been adopted by Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Muslims. Karma and rebirth are ideas shared by Jains, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, who appropriated these concepts in very different ways relative to one another. The Roman Catholic Church canonized a Saint Josaphat, who was a fictionalized character based on the life of the Buddha.² Such instances of cross-fertilization between religions

1. F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in February and May, 1870* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1882), 13. Or as Rudyard Kipling puts it in his poem "The English Flag": "What should they of England know who only England know?"

can easily be ignored when one's approach tends to focus on religious traditions in isolation from one another.

The present volume adopts a different approach. By examining the evolution of Asian religions over a six-hundred-year span known as the Axial Age (800–200 BCE) and against the background of their preaxial settings, we will have the opportunity to study religions both comparatively and developmentally. This method aims to combine the benefits of considering the historical evolution of religions, as championed in the single-tradition approach, with the benefits of regarding religious traditions in comparative fashion. The comparative dimension allows us to view how different religions respond to similar historical and social circumstances and to see the mutual interaction of religions in proximity to one another. But by limiting the time frame and the number of religions we cover, we gain a measure of depth in our investigation and connect them more fully with their social and political contexts. Thus, we will neither attempt to study all the major religions of the world, as most comparative introductions do, nor provide a comprehensive account of their historical developments, as many single-tradition introductions do. Rather, we shall examine several of the principal religions of Asia during a particular—and particularly important—period.

The great value of this book, however, derives not simply from the approach it adopts but from the era on which it is focused. The Axial Age, as we shall see, is simply one of the most intriguing periods in religious history. No other six-hundred-year period compares with it in terms of the spiritual and philosophical richness and creativity it holds. It is called “axial” because it marks a decisive turn in the evolution of the human spirit; it profoundly shaped who we are today, and it continues to offer us great insight for the living of our lives well over two thousand years later. It has lessons to teach us about the nature and function of religion in human experience as well as valuable guidance for the twenty-first century, whether we consider ourselves religious or not.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The book begins with a discussion of the Axial Age and its characteristics and contours. Although the Axial Age affected four major geographical regions, we will attend principally to the traditions that emerged in the three Asian sites: Zoroastrianism in Iran (with mention of its influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam); Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in India; and Confucianism and

2. John C. Hirsh, ed., *Barlam and Iosaphat: A Middle English Life of Buddha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Daoism in China. The book will then unfold regionally, beginning in Central Asia and then tracing developments in West Asia, South Asia, and finally, East Asia.

Although not an axial center, we begin in Central Asia in order to study the early Indo-European peoples who later migrated to West and South Asia and decisively shaped the religious outlook and practices of those regions. We will examine the shared culture of a group of these Central Asians known today as the “Indo-Iranians” and explore their similarities and differences after they divided in the second millennium bce. When we get to West Asia, particularly ancient Iran, we examine the context out of which came perhaps the most mysterious of all axial sages: Zoroaster, who is also known as Zarathustra. Zoroaster, who may have been the world’s first prophet, was responsible for reforming the ancient Iranian religious tradition and for numerous theological innovations, such as the apocalyptic Day of Judgment, the devil, and perhaps even the idea of a messiah or savior. We will look at these new conceptions both in their native Iranian context and as possible influences on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In South Asia, we start with the indigenous Indus Valley Civilization and witness the impact of the migration of a branch of the Indo-Iranians (retrospectively called the Indo-Aryans) that eventually made its way to northwestern India. We will explore the elements of both Indus and Indo-Aryan religions to prepare for the examination of the axial transformation of Indian religion. Preaxial religion in India focused on this-worldly concerns, such as the acquisition of material needs and comforts, a long life, and successful reproduction, and was decidedly oriented toward ritual.

With the advent of the Axial Age, Indian sages began to question the values associated with the material world and ritual practices. Indian religion became increasingly preoccupied with understanding the destiny of the individual and the nature of the deepest reality underlying all appearances. After a great deal of speculation, the ideas of reincarnation and karma were widely accepted, creating a new problem for Indian religion: attaining release from the endless rounds of death and rebirth known as *samsara*. Individuals by the hundreds began to renounce worldly life and to experiment with solutions to this predicament. Among the scores of new spiritualities developed during this time, we examine three of the most important and most enduring: the mysticism of the Upanishads, which provided the foundational structure for the massive conglomerate of religious beliefs and practices later known as Hinduism; the teachings of the Buddha, based on an approach he called the Middle Way; and the beliefs and practices of Mahavira, whose movement

became known as Jainism. Setting these traditions side by side will afford the chance to see how they responded to many of the same problems but offered distinctive and innovative solutions.

Our final destination is East Asia. We begin with a study of the preaxial culture of what later became China. Understanding this early period, which is barely within reach of current historiography, is important for appreciating the axial transformations brought about by Confucius and thinkers associated with the tradition of Daoism. We look at the earliest attestations of religious practices that have been important throughout Chinese history, including divination and ancestor reverence. Later, when we turn to Confucius and his followers and then to the Daoists, we observe how these practices were retained and reinterpreted to fit the new concern with moral behavior brought by the Axial Age. Claiming only to transmit ancient traditions, Confucius taught a comprehensive ethic of personal development that remained influential throughout Chinese history and provided the basis for the Chinese educational system. Daoism, often associated with the mythic figure of Laozi, was concerned with many of the same issues as Confucius but advocated alternative solutions. Throughout Chinese history, Confucianism and Daoism functioned as complements to one another in such a way that individuals could claim allegiance to both Daoist and Confucian traditions.

Finally, the book concludes with a set of reflections on the axial transformations, emphasizing the common themes across the centers of development as well as their distinctive qualities. Only then can we consider the overall significance of this age for human history and its major contributions to human spirituality.

A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

The Age of the Sages uses transliterations of many technical terms from several languages, especially Sanskrit, Pali, and Chinese. I have tried to keep these terms to a minimum, but it is often helpful to use transliterations from the original languages because precise English equivalents are not always available. Keeping a word or phrase in its original tongue reminds us that sometimes much is lost in translation. Furthermore, learning the basic vocabulary is a fundamental feature of understanding any religious tradition.

Some technical terms will appear in *italics* and other will not. The basis of this distinction is simple: familiarity. Certain words from non-Western religions have been adopted into English and are recognizable to most English-speakers. Accordingly, words like karma, samsara, and dharma will appear in

plain type in recognition of their status as English words. Other terms, however, are not so familiar and hence appear italicized. These include words such as *tianming*, *anatta*, and *li*. In addition, the titles of some texts will be italicized while others will appear plain. References to collections such as the Vedas and the Upanishads are not italicized, much like similar conventions for the Bible and the Qur'an. But most texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Analects*, will be italicized in the standard way for such documents.

The scholarly transliteration of the languages of the traditions we will cover often involves certain standard diacritical marks. To avoid creating unnecessary distractions, however, I have chosen to avoid diacritical markings as much as possible. The glossaries provide the full transliteration of terms including diacritics in parenthetical marks. For direct quotations from other texts, I have reproduced the transliteration and capitalization scheme of the original, even though it might be at slight odds with my own. Chinese words have been transliterated according to the pinyin system rather the older Wade-Giles method. Hence, a word that might be familiar to Western readers such as *Tao* has been rendered as the more phonetically correct *Dao*.