

CHAPTER ONE

The Axial Period

IN the Western World the philosophy of history was founded in the Christian faith. In a grandiose sequence of works ranging from St. Augustine to Hegel this faith visualised the movement of God through history. God's acts of revelation represent the decisive dividing lines. Thus Hegel could still say: All history goes toward and comes from Christ. The appearance of the Son of God is the axis of world history. Our chronology bears daily witness to this Christian structure of history.

But the Christian faith is only one faith, not the faith of mankind. This view of universal history therefore suffers from the defect that it can only be valid for believing Christians. But even in the West, Christians have not tied their empirical conceptions of history to their faith. An article of faith is not an article of empirical insight into the real course of history. For Christians sacred history was separated from profane history, as being different in its meaning. Even the believing Christian was able to examine the Christian tradition itself in the same way as other empirical objects of research.

An axis of world history, if such a thing exists, would have to be discovered *empirically*, as a fact capable of being accepted as such by all men, Christians included. This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity; its character would have to be, if not empirically cogent and evident, yet so convincing to empirical insight as to give rise to a common frame of historical self-comprehension for all peoples—for the West, for Asia, and for all men on earth, without regard to particular articles of faith. It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the 'Axial Period'.

A. CHARACTERISATION OF THE AXIAL PERIOD

The most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period. Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mo-ti, Chuang-tse, Lieh-tsu and a host of others; India produced the Upanishads and Buddha and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to scepticism, to materialism, sophism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught a challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer, of the philosophers—Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato—of the tragedians, Thucydides and Archimedes. Everything implied by these names developed during these few centuries almost simultaneously in China, India, and the West, without any one of these regions knowing of the others.

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence.

All this took place in reflection. Consciousness became once more conscious of itself, thinking became its own object. Spiritual conflicts arose, accompanied by attempts to convince others through the communication of thoughts, reasons and experiences. The most contradictory possibilities were essayed. Discussion, the formation of parties and the division of the spiritual realm into opposites which nonetheless remained related to one another, created unrest and movement to the very brink of spiritual chaos.

In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created. The step into universality was taken in every sense.

As a result of this process, hitherto unconsciously accepted ideas, customs and conditions were subjected to examination, questioned and liquidated. Everything was swept into the vortex. In so far as the traditional substance still possessed vitality and reality, its manifestations were clarified and thereby transmuted.

The Mythical Age, with its tranquillity and self-evidence, was at

an end. The Greek, Indian and Chinese philosophers were un-mythical in their decisive insights, as were the prophets in their ideas of God. Rationality and rationally clarified experience launched a struggle against the myth (*logos* against *mythos*); a further struggle developed for the transcendence of the One God against non-existent demons, and finally an ethical rebellion took place against the unreal figures of the gods. Religion was rendered ethical, and the majesty of the deity thereby increased. The myth, on the other hand, became the material of a language which expressed by it something very different from what it had originally signified: it was turned into parable. Myths were remoulded, were understood at a new depth during this transition, which was myth-creating after a new fashion, at the very moment when the myth as a whole was destroyed. The old mythical world slowly sank into oblivion, but remained as a background to the whole through the continued belief of the mass of the people (and was subsequently able to gain the upper hand over wide areas).

This overall modification of humanity may be termed *spiritualisation*. The unquestioned grasp on life is loosened, the calm of polarities becomes the disquiet of opposites and antinomies. Man is no longer enclosed within himself. He becomes uncertain of himself and thereby open to new and boundless possibilities. He can hear and understand what no one had hitherto asked or proclaimed. The unheard-of becomes manifest. Together with his world and his own self, Being becomes sensible to man, but not with finality: the question remains.

For the first time *philosophers* appeared. Human beings dared to rely on themselves as individuals. Hermits and wandering thinkers in China, ascetics in India, philosophers in Greece and prophets in Israel all belong together, however much they may differ from each other in their beliefs, the contents of their thought and their inner dispositions. Man proved capable of contrasting himself inwardly with the entire universe. He discovered within himself the origin from which to raise himself above his own self and the world.

In *speculative thought* he lifts himself up towards Being itself, which is apprehended without duality in the disappearance of subject and object, in the coincidence of opposites. That which is experienced in the loftiest flights of the spirit as a coming-to-oneself within Being, or as *unio mystica*, as becoming one with the Godhead, or as becoming a tool for the will of God is expressed in an ambiguous and easily misunderstood form in objectifying speculative thought.

It is the *specifically human in man* which, bound to and concealed

within the body, fettered by instincts and only dimly aware of himself, longs for liberation and redemption and is able to attain to them already in this world—in soaring toward the idea, in the resignation of ataraxia, in the absorption of meditation, in the knowledge of his self and the world as *atman*, in the experience of *nirvana*, in concord with the *tao*, or in surrender to the will of God. These paths are widely divergent in their conviction and dogma, but common to all of them is man's reaching out beyond himself by growing aware of himself within the whole of Being and the fact that he can tread them only as an individual on his own. He may renounce all worldly goods, may withdraw into the desert, into the forest or the mountains, may discover as a hermit the creative power of solitude, and may then return into the world as the possessor of knowledge, as a sage or as a prophet. What was later called reason and personality was revealed for the first time during the Axial Period.

What the individual achieves is by no means passed on to all. The gap between the peaks of human potentiality and the crowd became exceptionally great at that time. Nonetheless, what the individual becomes indirectly changes all. The whole of humanity took a forward leap.

Corresponding to this new spiritual world, we find a *sociological* situation showing analogies in all three regions. There were a multitude of small States and cities, a struggle of all against all, which to begin with nevertheless permitted an astonishing prosperity, an unfolding of vigour and wealth. In China the small States and cities had achieved sovereign life under the powerless imperial rulers of the Chou dynasty; the political process consisted of the enlargement of small units through the subjection of other small units. In Hellas and the Near East small territorial units—even, to some extent, those subjected by Persia—enjoyed an independent existence. In India there were many States and free cities.

Reciprocal intercourse set a spiritual movement circulating within each of these three regions. The Chinese philosophers—Confucius, Mo-ti and others—wandered about the country and met in places of renown favourable to the spiritual life, founding schools which are termed academies by sinologists: the sophists and philosophers of Hellas travelled about in similar fashion and Buddha passed his entire life in wandering from place to place.

In the past, spiritual conditions had been comparatively enduring; despite catastrophes everything had repeated itself, confined within the horizons of a still, very slow spiritual movement

that did not enter consciousness and was therefore not apprehended. Now, on the contrary, tension increases and causes a movement of torrential swiftness.

This movement reaches consciousness. Human existence becomes the object of meditation, as *history*. Men feel and know that something extraordinary is beginning in their own present. But this very realisation also makes men aware of the fact that this present was preceded by an infinite past. At the very commencement of this awakening of the specifically human spirit, man is sustained by memory and is conscious of belonging to a late or even a decadent age.

Men see themselves faced by *catastrophe* and feel the *desire to help* through insight, education and reform. The endeavour is made to dominate the course of events by planning, right conditions are to be re-established or brought about for the first time. History as a whole is seen as a sequence of shapes assumed by the world, either as a process of continual decline, or as a circular motion, or as an ascent. Thought is devoted to the manner in which human beings may best live together, may best be governed and administered. Practical activity is dominated by ideas of reform. Philosophers travel from State to State, become advisers and teachers, are scorned or sought after, enter into discussions and compete with one another. A sociological parallel can be drawn between Confucius' failure at the court of Wei and Plato's failure at Syracuse, between the school of Confucius, which trained future statesmen, and the academy of Plato, which served the same purpose.

The age that saw all these developments, which spanned several centuries, cannot be regarded as a simple upward movement. It was an age of simultaneous destruction and creation. No final consummation was attained. The highest potentialities of thought and practical expression realised in individuals did not become common property, because the majority of men were unable to follow in their footsteps. What began as freedom of motion finally became anarchy. When the age lost its creativeness, a process of dogmatic fixation and levelling-down took place in all three cultural realms. Out of a disorder that was growing intolerable arose a striving after new ties, through the re-establishment of enduring conditions.

The *conclusion* is at first of a political character. Mighty empires, made great by conquest, arose almost simultaneously in China (Tsin Shi hwang-ti), in India (Maurya dynasty) and in the West (the Hellenistic empires and the *Imperium Romanum*). Everywhere the first outcome of the collapse was an order of technological and organisational planning.

But the *relation to the spirit of what had gone before* remained everywhere. It became a model and an object of veneration. Its achievements and great personalities stood clearly in view and provided the content of schooling and education (Confucianism was evolved under the Han dynasty, Buddhism by Asoka, and the age of Augustus consciously established Graeco-Roman cultural education).

The universal empires which came into being at the end of the Axial Period considered themselves founded for eternity. But their stability was only apparent. Even though these empires lasted for a long time by comparison with the State-formations of the Axial Period, in the end they all decayed and fell to pieces. Subsequent millennia produced an extraordinary amount of change. From one point of view the disintegration and re-establishment of great empires has constituted history ever since the end of the Axial Period, as it had constituted it through the millennia during which the ancient civilisations were flourishing. During these millennia, however, it had possessed a different significance: it had lacked that spiritual tension which was first felt during the Axial Period and has been at work ever since, questioning all human activity and conferring upon it a new meaning.

B. THE STRUCTURE OF WORLD HISTORY SINCE THE AXIAL PERIOD

Reference to a few facts, such as I have made, does not suffice in itself to bring about complete conviction as to the truth of a particular view of history. Portrayal of the full wealth of historical material can alone cause the thesis either to appear in ever greater clarity or to be rejected. Such a portrayal is beyond the scope of a short book. The facts to which I have referred should be looked upon as a question and a challenge to put the thesis to the test.

Assuming this view of the Axial Period to be correct, it would seem to throw a light upon the entire history of the world, in such a way as to reveal something like a structure of world history. Let me endeavour to adumbrate this structure:

(1) The *thousands of years old ancient civilisations* are everywhere brought to an end by the Axial Period, which melts them down, assimilates them or causes them to sink from view, irrespective of whether it was the same peoples or others that became the bearers of the new cultural forms. Pre-Axial cultures, 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. The ancient cultures only persist in

those elements which enter into the Axial Period and become part of the new beginning. Measured against the lucid humanity of the Axial Period, a strange veil seems to lie over the most ancient cultures preceding it, as though man had not yet really come to himself. This fact is not obscured by isolated beginnings, moving in themselves, but without effect on the whole or on what followed (such as the Egyptian discourse of a man tired of life with his soul, the Babylonian psalms of repentance and the Gilgamesh). The monumental element in religion and religious art, and the extensive State-formations and juridical creations corresponding to it, are objects of awe and admiration to the consciousness of the Axial Period; they are even taken as models (by Confucius and Plato, for instance), but they are seen in a new light that transmutes their meaning.

Thus the imperial idea, which gains new force toward the end of the Axial Period and terminates this era in the political domain, was a heritage from the ancient civilisations. But whereas it originally constituted a culture-creating principle, it now becomes the means by which a declining culture is stabilised by being laid in its coffin. It is as though the principle that once bore mankind upward, despite its factually despotic nature, had broken through afresh in the form of conscious despotism, but this time merely to preserve a culture in icy rigidity.

(2) *Until today* mankind 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 ever-recurrent event in China, India and the West.

(3) The Axial Period commenced within spatial limitations, but *it became historically all-embracing*. Any people that attained no part in the Axial Period remained 'primitive', continued to live that unhistorical life which had been going on for tens or even hundreds of thousands of years. Men 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. All human beings living after the Axial Period either remained in a primitive state or took part in the new course of events, now the only one of fundamental sig-

nificance. Once history had come into being, the primitive peoples represented the residue of prehistory, which occupied a continually shrinking space and has only now reached its final end.

(4) Between these three realms a *profound mutual comprehension was possible* from the moment they met. At the first encounter they recognised that they were concerned with the same problems. Despite the distance that separated them they at once became involved in one another. To be sure, they were not bound by the common possession of a single, objective truth (such a truth is only to be found in science which, methodologically conscious and compelling general assent to its propositions, is capable of spreading over the entire globe without undergoing any metamorphosis as a result and has a claim on the collaboration of all); but the authentically and absolutely true, which is lived by mankind historically from diverse origins, was seen and heard reciprocally in this encounter.

To sum up: The conception of the Axial Period furnishes the questions and standards with which to approach all preceding and subsequent developments. The outlines of the preceding civilisations 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. From it world history receives the only structure and unity that has endured—at least until our own time.

C. EXAMINATION OF THE AXIAL PERIOD THESIS

1. *Does it exist as a fact?*

The earliest discussion of the facts of the Axial Period known to me is to be found in the works of Lasaulx and Viktor von Strauss.

Lasaulx (*Neuer Versuch einer Philosophie der Geschichte*, Munich, 1856, p. 115) writes: 'It cannot possibly be an accident that, six hundred years before Christ, Zarathustra in Persia, Gautama Buddha in India, Confucius in China, the prophets in Israel, King Numa in Rome and the first philosophers—Ionians, Dorians and Eleatics—in Hellas, all made their appearance pretty well simultaneously as reformers of the national religion.'

Viktor von Strauss, in his wonderful Lao-tse commentary, p. lxiv (1870), says: 'During the centuries when Lao-tse and Confucius were living in China, a strange movement of the spirit passed through all civilised peoples. In Israel Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel and Ezekiel were prophesying and in a renewed generation

(521–516) the second temple was erected in Jerusalem. Among the Greeks Thales was still living, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Xenophanes appeared and Parmenides was born. In Persia an important reformation of Zarathustra's ancient teaching seems to have been carried through, and India produced Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism.'

Since then these facts have now and then been noted, but only marginally. As far as I am aware, they have never been grasped as a whole, with the aim of demonstrating the universal parallels obtaining for the entire spiritual being of the humanity of that time. Let us consider possible objections to this view.

(1) One objection might be that *the common element is only apparent*. The differences—differences of language and race, differences as to the types of empire and in the mode of historical recollection—are so great that, by comparison, the common element strikes us as no more than a series of coincidences. Every clear-cut formulation of the common element as a whole is refuted by the facts. Or, it is argued, it amounts to no more than the trivial maxim that fundamentally everything can be found everywhere amongst men, either as a beginning or as a potentiality. In the realisation of common human possibilities it is the differences which are essential, distinctive and historical; the whole can never be apprehended as a unity, except in the unhistorical, universal characteristics of human existence.

The answer to this is: What is involved in the Axial Period is precisely the common element in an overall historical picture, the break-through to the principles which, right up to our own time, have been operative for humanity in borderline situations. The essential thing here is this common element, which does not stem from all over the earth, wherever man as such exists, but historically speaking solely from these three origins and the narrow area they occupy. The question is whether increasing knowledge will prove this common element to go even deeper than appeared at first, despite the differences that still remain. In that event, the temporal coincidence would become a fact, all the more astonishing the more clearly it is visualised. To demonstrate it thus convincingly would, however, demand a broader canvas.

(2) A further possible objection would be: The Axial Period is not a fact at all, but *the product of a judgement of value*. It is on the basis of a preconceived opinion that the achievements of this period are appraised so inordinately highly.

The answer to this is: In matters of the spirit, a fact can only be apprehended through the understanding of meaning. Understanding, however, is by its nature valuation. Though it rests

empirically upon an accumulation of separate data, an historical construction never comes into being through these alone. Only through understanding do we arrive at our view of the Axial Period, as of the spirit of any historical period. And this view involves understanding and valuation at the same time; it includes the fact that we are emotionally moved, because we feel ourselves touched by it, because it concerns us as our own history and not merely as a past of which we can trace the effects, but as the past whose wider, more original effect, which is continually beginning afresh, is incalculable.

For this reason the whole man is the organon of historical research. 'Every man sees that which he bears within his own heart.' The source of understanding is our own present, the here and now, our sole reality. Thus the higher we ourselves ascend, the more clearly do we see the Axial Period.

If the hierarchy of the contents of history can only be grasped in the subjectivity of human existence, this subjectivity is not extinguished in the objectivity of something purely factual, but in the objectivity of communal perception—perception on the part of a community which man seeks after if he does not find himself already within it; for truth is that which links us to one another.

It is my thesis that in common understanding, which is inseparably bound up with valuation, we shall realise the significance of the Axial Period. This thesis is not, by the nature of the matter, susceptible of final proof; it can, however, be substantiated through a widening and deepening of the conception.

(3) A further objection may be: *This parallel is not historical in character.* For that which has no contact in spiritual intercourse does not share a common history.

This objection was already put forward against Hegel, who brought together China, India and the West as stages in the dialectical sequence of the development of the spirit. It was argued that here no real contact led from one stage to the next, as it did between the various stages in the development of the history of the West.

Our thesis, however, involves something altogether different. It is precisely this series of stages from China to Greece whose reality we deny; there is no such series, either in time or in meaning. The true situation was rather one of contemporaneous, side by side existence without contact. To begin with, several roads seem to lead from disparate origins toward the same goal. There is a multiplicity of the same in three shapes. There are three independent roots of one history, which later—after isolated and inter-

rupted contacts, finally only a few centuries ago and properly speaking not until our own day—become a single unity.

The question at issue is, therefore, the nature of the parallelism involved.

2. *What is the nature of the parallelism asserted?*

The facts of the Axial Period might represent nothing more than a number of synchronistic curiosities devoid of historical significance. Numerous strange synchronisms can be pointed to in world history. For example:

In the sixteenth century the Jesuits discovered in Japan a Buddhist sect which had flourished there since the thirteenth century. It seemed to bear (and actually did bear) an astonishing resemblance to Protestantism. According to the description given by the Japanologist Florenz (in the textbook by Chantepie de la Saussaye) their teaching was somewhat as follows: Man's own efforts contribute nothing toward his salvation. Everything depends upon faith, faith in Amida's loving kindness and aid. There are no meritorious good works. Prayer is not an achievement, but only an expression of gratitude for the redemption granted by Amida. 'If even the good shall enter into eternal life, how much more so shall sinners', said Shinran, the founder of the sect. As against traditional Buddhism it demanded: no works, no magical formulae or conjurations, no amulets, pilgrimages, atonements, fasts or other forms of asceticism. The layman has the same prospects of salvation as the priest and the monk. The priests are only a body of teachers to the laity. There is no more need for them to differ from the laity in their way of life and they wear the same clothes. Celibacy is abolished. The family is regarded as the best sphere of action for the religious life. Members of the sect are counselled to 'preserve order, obey the laws of the State and, as good citizens, to care for the wellbeing of their country'.

This example of synchronicity, which extends to identity with the basic doctrines of Lutheranism, is astonishing. Numerous other parallels occur throughout the centuries, from China to Europe. They have been tabulated on synchronistic charts.

The answer to this is:

Firstly: It can be said of many parallels in history, whether they are synchronistic or not, that they manifest a rule which holds good for single phenomena. Only in the Axial Period do we encounter a parallelism that follows no general law, but constitutes rather a specifically historical, unique fact of an all-embracing character which includes within itself all spiritual phenomena. The Axial Period is the only one that represents a

total universal parallelism on the plane of world history, and not merely the chance concurrence of particular phenomena. Single phenomena or series of phenomena do not suffice to establish the kind of parallelism with which we are dealing in the Axial Period.

Secondly, the three parallel movements are close to each other only during those centuries. The attempt to prolong the parallels beyond the Axial Period—in synchronistic tables spanning millennia—becomes increasingly artificial. The lines of subsequent development do not run parallel, but rather diverge. Though originally they appeared like three roads directed toward the same goal, they finally became deeply estranged from one another. But the farther back we go toward the Axial Period, the closer our relationship becomes, the closer we feel to one another.

It seems to me continually more unlikely that this overall aspect of the Axial Period should be no more than an illusion created by historical coincidence. It seems rather to be the manifestation of some profound common element, the one primal source of humanity. What followed later in the course of increasing divergence produces occasional analogies, marks of a common origin, but never again *in toto* that real, original community of meaning.

The only comparable world historical parallelism occurs at the commencement of the ancient civilisations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus valley and China.

Within this temporal coincidence, however, there are differences of millennia. The beginnings stretch from 5000 to 3000 B.C. (Mesopotamia and Egypt; the earliest discoveries on Crete and at Troy date from the same period). The beginnings of the Chinese and Indus civilisations fall within the third millennium B.C.

Comparable to these ancient civilisations are those of Mexico and Peru, which are conjectured to have arisen during the first millennium A.D.

Their common properties are highly developed organisation and a high level of technical achievement. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus valley and in China along the banks of the Hwang-ho, analogous civilisations sprung up in the river valleys characterised by the central administration of a highly evolved mechanism for satisfying the needs of the community.

They also have in common a magical religion destitute of philosophical enlightenment, devoid of any quest for salvation and lacking any break-through into liberty in the face of extreme situations, as well as a singular apathy accompanying extraordinary stylistic achievements in art; especially, in the case of some of these civilisations, in architecture and sculpture.

However, this parallelism does not exhibit the same synchronism as does that of the Axial Period. Moreover it consists only of the similarity of an established type, not of a spiritual movement. It involves strangely stable conditions which, after destructive catastrophe, tend to reconstitute themselves in their old form. It is a world between prehistory, which is almost a closed book to us, and history proper which no longer permits things to remain constant in the realm of the spirit. It is a world which furnished the basis for the Axial Period, but was submerged in and by the latter.

3. *What caused the facts of the Axial Period?*

If the facts of the Axial Period are beyond dispute, we must now ask ourselves what caused them. Why did the same thing happen at three mutually independent points? The fact that these three regions were originally unknown to each other seems, at first, to be entirely extraneous—but it is an historical mystery which progressive research into the facts of the situation renders increasingly great. The Axial Period, with its overwhelming plenitude of spiritual creations, which has determined all human history down to the present day, is accompanied by the enigma of the occurrence, in these three mutually independent regions, of an analogous and inseparably connected process.

Apart from the Axial Period, the mystery of simultaneity applies, as we have shown, to perhaps only one other situation in the whole of world history: the genesis of the ancient civilisations. The question is, why did the development from the general condition of prehistoric peoples to the ancient civilisations take place more or less simultaneously—despite intervals of up to two millennia—in the river valleys of the Nile, of Mesopotamia, the Indus, and the Hwang-ho?

The usual answer is that analogous tasks (provision of irrigation and the fight against floods) had similar consequences. But in that case, why simultaneously? Why only in respect of these particular rivers? Why much later and under different conditions in America?

Commercial and cultural exchanges might have had a releasing effect. At all times civilising achievements of a craft character have slowly made their way across the earth, or at least the entire Eurasian continent. The invention of writing may possibly have taken place at a single spot and spread from there; without it the tasks of administration, and especially of river-control, would have been insuperable. But these are only possibilities. Such exchanges can be proved to have occurred in the third millennium between the Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia and the culture of

the Indus valley; they existed between Egypt and Babylonia in early times, being very active during the second millennium.

But the multiple developments leading up to the ancient civilisations of the early millennia cannot be explained in terms of diffusion from a single source. E. Meyer (*Geschichte des Altertums*, I, 2, p. 935) therefore remarks: 'We must assume that around 5000 B.C. the genus *homo* had reached a stage in his evolution that opened up to all human groups or peoples, whose inherent aptitudes (i.e. the spiritual forces latent with them) rendered them capable of rising above this level at all, the way toward the genesis of a culture which would thereafter continue to advance.' The parallel phenomena would, in that event, have to be regarded as simultaneous developments in the biological evolution of human beings who are members of a similarly endowed humanity. That which, by virtue of a common origin, is dormant in all of them, manifests itself simultaneously and independently—as happens during the life-span of identical twins who have been separated from one another.

But this idea is a mere figure of speech which explains nothing. It is empty because it provides no basis for further research. The 'evolution of the genus *homo*' is not a reality that can be apprehended as such or serve as an explanation of anything. And, above all, this 'biological evolution' would only have been accomplished by a small, scattered section of mankind, not by mankind as a whole.

The mystery of the simultaneous inception of the Axial Period appears to me to be situated at a much deeper level than the problem of the birth of the ancient civilisations. In the first place, the simultaneity is much more exact and, in the second, it relates to spiritual-historical developments in the whole conscious, thinking aspect of humanity. The three regions which, from the beginnings of the ancient civilisations onward, were possessed of a unique character, brought forth creations during the millennium before Christ upon which the entire history of the human spirit has rested ever since.

These developments were originally independent of one another. Real communications and stimuli must be ruled out. Only after the penetration of Buddhism into China, which took place at the end of the Axial Period, did a profound spiritual communication between India and China come into being. Though there had always been relations between India and the Aest, these only became extensive during Roman times, *via* Alexandria. But the origin of these developments is not affected

at all by the relations between India and the West, their further course not visibly so.

Let us see how this mystery has been explained:

Lasaulx writes: 'This strange concurrence can only be founded on the inner unity of substance in the life of mankind and the life of peoples, on a vibration of the total life of humanity which passed through all peoples, and not on the particular efflorescence of the spirit of any one people.' But that is not an explanation, it is merely a paraphrase of the mystery.

V. von Strauss talks of a hidden law: 'This phenomenon, for which there is no lack of parallels in history, and from which very mysterious laws may be inferred, probably has its roots, on the one hand, in the total organism of mankind, by virtue of its homogeneous origin, while on the other it presupposes the influence of a higher spiritual power, in the same way that the urge to florescence in nature only arrives at the unfolding of its magnificence through the vivifying rays of the returning sun.' But, as with Lasaulx, such figures of speech only paraphrase the mystery. In addition they make the mistake of levelling down the uniqueness of the historical fact of the parallels of the Axial Period in the name of supposedly similar instances of shared development throughout history.

Keyserling says (*Buch vom Ursprung*, p. 151): 'From generation to generation men seem to change in the same fashion and in the same direction, and at turning-points of history a similar change embraces enormous areas and peoples who are complete strangers to one another.' But this again is simply a paraphrase of the mystery, and a bad one at that, because it sinks down completely into the realm of biology without there being the slightest basis for approaching the problem from a biological standpoint.

All these explanations overlook the clear fact that it was not mankind, not all men, who by that time had occupied the entire planet, but only a few, relatively very few, who took this step forward at three points. As in the case of the ancient civilisations not mankind as such, but only a small section was involved.

Instead, therefore, of taking as a basis a biology of mankind, something falsely supposed to be held in common and valid for the whole of humanity, the attempt has been made to trace back the few peoples amongst whom this revolution occurred to a *common historical origin* within mankind. This origin is admittedly unknown to us. It would have to be assumed to lie in prehistoric Central Asia. With their source in such a common origin the parallel developments could perhaps be considered related. But this hypothesis has so far eluded all possibility of verification. It is

improbable because it would have to prove a common origin for such disparate racial groups as the Chinese, the Indo-Europeans and the Semites; furthermore, this common origin would have to be taken as only a few millennia prior to the period at which the inception of these peoples' history becomes visible to us—biologically speaking a very short space of time and hardly sufficient to allow profound racial differentiations to take place.

In response to the question, why this simultaneity? only one methodologically arguable hypothesis has so far been advanced, that put forward by Alfred Weber. The penetration of the nations of charioteers and horsemen from Central Asia—which did, in fact, reach China, India and the West and introduced the horse to the ancient civilisations—had, so he argues, analogous consequences in all three regions. The men of these equestrian peoples came to experience, thanks to the horse, the limitless vastness of the world. They took over the ancient civilisations by conquest. In hazards and disasters they experienced the problematic character of existence, as master-peoples they developed an heroico-tragic consciousness that found expression in the epic.

This turning-point of history was brought about by the Indo-European nations of horsemen. By the end of the third millennium they had reached Europe and the Mediterranean. A great new thrust carried them as far as Iran and India round about 1200. In the same way, other nations of horsemen reached China by the end of the second millennium.

Before, from Europe to China, there had been the ancient civilisations reaching back into the depths of the past and characterised variously as matriarchal, as civilisations of settled cattle-breeders, or simply as the population masses flourishing in closed self-sufficiency in the fertile regions of the belt of civilisation extending from China to Europe.

History became a conflict between these two forces: the old, stable, unawakened matriarchal powers against the new, mobile, liberating tendencies of the equestrian peoples which were rising into consciousness.

Alfred Weber's thesis demonstrates the existence of a real uniformity within the Eurasian bloc; how far the appearance of the equestrian peoples was decisive is difficult to determine, however. Geographical situations and historical constellations may have given rise to the preconditions; but what set the work of creation in motion remains the great enigma.

Weber's thesis possesses a singular power of illumination arising out of its simple, causal explanation based on the human character of the life of the horseman. But it still applies at most to

a precondition. The contents of the Axial Period are so remarkable and all-embracing that one hesitates to derive them from such a cause, even if it be regarded as only a necessary precondition. Counter-evidence is afforded, for example, by China, which produced the rich contents of the Axial Period, but neither the tragic consciousness nor the epic (in China nothing comparable to the epic appears until the centuries after Christ, during the period of long-drawn-out struggles against new peoples, corresponding to our migration of the peoples). A further contradictory instance is Palestine, whose population experienced no mingling with equestrian peoples and yet, through the prophets, produced an essential factor in the spiritual creation of the Axial Period.

The credibility of the hypothesis is further impaired by the fact that movements, migrations and conquests had been precipitating themselves upon the ancient civilisations for millennia; to this is added the further fact that the period of incubation between the Indo-European invasions—themselves distributed over a period of more than a thousand years—and the inception of the spiritual development of the Axial Period was very long, while this inception, when it took place, did so with such astonishingly exact simultaneity.

That it is necessary to enquire after the historical reason for the events of the Axial Period is due to the fact that it is a question of a new departure within mankind—involving small areas only—and not of a development shared by the whole of humanity. The Axial Period does not represent a universal stage in human evolution, but a singular ramified historical process.

Whereas Alfred Weber has given an ingenious and clearcut reply to this question, that can be put to the test and rendered fruitful by further discussion, the mystery of the lack of contact between the three independent origins has usually been veiled by the vague assertion of a general Eurasian interrelationship. Perhaps, so it is meaninglessly said, influences no longer apparent to us were at work. The unity of the history of the whole Eurasian bloc, determined by constantly renewed advances, migrations and conquests from Central Asia, is pointed to, as well as the demonstrable parallels that can be observed in archaeological finds of a technological and ornamental character. These finds go back to early prehistory and permit a perpetual cultural exchange over the entire major continent to be inferred. Against this, however, it must be said that the spiritual movement of the Axial Period, in its simultaneity and the sublimity of its content, cannot be accounted for in terms of such migrations and exchanges.

In the end, the simplest explanation of the phenomena of the

Axial Period seems to lie in common sociological preconditions favourable to spiritual creativeness: many small States and small towns: a politically divided age engaged in incessant conflicts; the misery caused by wars and revolutions accompanied by simultaneous prosperity elsewhere, since destruction was neither universal nor radical; questioning of previously existing conditions. These are sociological considerations which are meaningful and lead to methodical investigation, but ultimately they merely illuminate the facts and do not provide a causal explanation of them. For these conditions form part of the total spiritual phenomenon of the Axial Period. They are preconditions of which the creative result is not a necessary sequel; as part of the overall pattern their own origin remains in question.

No one can adequately comprehend what occurred here and became the axis of world history! The facts of this break-through must be seen from all sides, their many aspects must be fixed in the mind and their meaning interpreted, in order to gain a provisional conception of the Axial Period, which grows more mysterious the more closely we examine it.

It might seem as though I were out to prove direct intervention on the part of the deity, without saying so openly. By no means. For that would not only be a *salto mortale* of cognition into pseudo-knowledge, but also an importunity against the deity. I want rather to prevent the comfortable and empty conception of history as a comprehensible and necessary movement of humanity; I should like to maintain awareness of the dependence of our cognition upon current standpoints, methods and facts and, thereby, of the particularity of all cognition; I should like to hold the question open and leave room for possible new starting-points in the search for knowledge, which we cannot imagine in advance at all.

Wonder at the mystery is itself a fruitful act of understanding, in that it affords a point of departure for further research. It may even be the very goal of all understanding, since it means penetrating through the greatest possible amount of knowledge to authentic nescience, instead of allowing Being to disappear by absolutising it away into a self-enclosed object of cognition.

4. *The meaning of the Axial Period*

The problem of the meaning of the Axial Period is something quite different from that of its cause.

The fact of the threefold manifestation of the Axial Period is in the nature of a miracle, in so far as no really adequate explanation is possible within the limits of our present knowledge. The hidden

meaning of this fact, however, cannot be discovered empirically at all, as a meaning somewhere intended by someone. In enquiring after it we are really only putting our own interpretation on the facts and causing something to grow out of them for us. If, in the process, we make use of terms which seem to indicate that we have in mind some plan of providence, these are only metaphors.

(a) Really to visualise the facts of the Axial Period and to make them the basis of our universal conception of history is to gain possession of something *common to all mankind*, beyond all differences of creed. It is one thing to see the unity of history from one's own ground and in the light of one's own faith, another to think of it in communication with every other human ground, linking one's own consciousness to the alien consciousness. In this sense, it can be said of the centuries between 80 and 200 B.C. that they are the empirically evident axis of world history for all men.

The transcendental history of the revealed Christian faith is made up out of the creation, the fall, stages of revelation, prophecies, the appearance of the Son of God, redemption and the last judgement. As the contents of the faith of an historical human group it remains untouched. That which binds all men together, however, cannot be revelation but must be experience. Revelation is the form taken by particular historical creeds, experience is accessible to man as man. We—all men—can share the knowledge of the reality of this universal transformation of mankind during the Axial Period. Although confined to China, India and the West, and though there was to begin with no contact between these three worlds, the Axial Period nonetheless founded universal history and, spiritually, drew all men into itself.

(b) The fact of the threefold historical modification effected by the step we call the Axial Period acts as a *challenge to boundless communication*. To see and understand others helps in the achievement of clarity about oneself, in overcoming the potential narrowness of all self-enclosed historicity, and in taking the leap into expanding reality. This venture into boundless communication is once again the secret of becoming-human, not as it occurred in the inaccessible prehistoric past, but as it takes place within ourselves.

This demand for communication—made by the historical fact of the threefold origin—is the best remedy against the erroneous claim to exclusive possession of truth by any one creed. For a creed can only be absolute in its historical existence, not universally valid for all in its predications, like scientific truth. The claim to exclusive possession of truth, that tool of fanaticism, of human arrogance and self-deception through the will to power,

that disaster for the West—most intensely so in its secularised forms, such as the dogmatic philosophies and the so-called scientific ideologies—can be vanquished by the very fact that God has manifested himself historically in several fashions and has opened up many ways toward Himself. It is as though the deity were issuing a warning, through the language of universal history, against the claim to exclusiveness in the possession of truth.

(c) If the Axial Period gains in importance with the degree to which we immerse ourselves in it, the question arises: *Is this period, are its creations, the yardstick* for all that follows? If we do not consider the quantitative aspect of its effect, nor the extent of the areas involved in its political processes, nor the pre-eminence accorded to spiritual phenomena throughout the centuries, is it still true that the austere grandeur, the creative lucidity, the depth of meaning and the extent of the leap toward new spiritual worlds contained in the phenomena of the Axial Period are to be regarded as the spiritual peak of all history up to the present? Do later manifestations, in spite of the heights to which they attained and in spite of having become irreplaceable in their turn, pale before the earlier—Virgil before Homer, Augustus before Solon, Jesus before Jeremiah?

It would certainly be wrong to answer this question with a mechanical affirmative. The later manifestation invariably possesses a value of its own, which was not present in the earlier one: a maturity of its own, a sublime costliness, a depth of soul, especially in the case of the 'exception'. It is quite impossible to arrange history in a hierarchy of values following automatically from one universally applicable conception. But the manner in which this question is formulated—and also, perhaps, a prejudice against the later—does result from an understanding of the Axial Period. This in turn illumines what is specifically new and great after a different fashion and does not belong to the Axial Period. For example: Anyone studying philosophy is likely to find that after months with the Greek philosophers, St. Augustine affects him like a liberation from coldness and impersonality into questions of conscience, which have remained with us ever since the time of St. Augustine but were alien to the Greeks. Conversely, however, after spending some time on St. Augustine, he will experience an increasing desire to return to the Greeks and cleanse himself of the feeling of impurity that seems to grow with the pursuit of this type of thinking, to regain his health by immersion in the pellucid waters of Greek thought. Nowhere on earth can we find final truth, authentic salvation.

The Axial Period too ended in failure. History went on.

Only this much seems certain to me: Our present-day historical consciousness, as well as our consciousness of our present situation, is determined, down to consequences I have only been able to hint at, by the conception of the Axial Period, irrespective of whether this thesis is accepted or rejected. It is a question of the manner in which the unity of mankind becomes a concrete reality for us.