

The Forgotten Earth: Nature, World Religions and Worldlessness in the Legacy of the Axial Age/Moral Revolution Eugene Halton

SYNOPSIS

Introduction: The Powers of Nature and the Myths of Mind

The rise and legacy of world religions out of that period centered roughly around 500-600 BCE, what John Stuart-Glennie termed in 1873 the moral revolution, and Karl Jaspers later, in 1949, called the axial age, has been marked by heightened ideas of transcendence. Yet ironically, the world itself, in the literal sense of the actual earth, took on a diminished role as a central element of religious sensibility in the world religions, particularly in the Abrahamic religions. Given the issue today of ecological unsustainability, including massive die-offs of wildlife and ever-increasing global human population and consumption, the legacy of those world religions face the question I consider here: Can religion transcend the earth in the long run?

From A Vast Primal Morality to an Archimedean Ethics

With the Axial Age/Moral Revolution, comes the possibility of transcendence of the world per se. The moral revolution/Axial Age represented significant changes in civilization, to be sure, but it can also be taken, as I do, as a second phase in the radical shift to anthropocentric mind already begun with the advent of agriculturally based civilization.

The axial ideal of transcendence connects to a larger ideal, manifest not only in the legacies of the world religions but in contemporary science and technology, of a philosophy of escape from the earth. I show how ideas of axial transcendence, celebrated by scholars such as Jaspers and Robert Bellah, nevertheless involve an unacknowledged tragic cost, the forgetting of the earth and its lessons and limits as central to what I have termed elsewhere, "sustainable wisdom."

The Subjugation of the Earth

On how the detachment from wild habitat as object of religious focus marks the legacy of the religions of the book.

The Forgotten Conversations

On how the immersion through learning relationships, perceptive sensings, experience, and practices of attunement to the wild habitat and its systems of communication, such as that of songbirds or plant communication networks, was ingredient in our evolutionary passage to becoming humans and the development of religious consciousness.

D. H. Lawrence and the Tragic Excursus

Unlike Jaspers's linear axial progressivism, even though tempered with a sober view of the dark tendencies released by modern technology, and Stuart-Glennie's more nuanced but naive progressivist optimism, Lawrence saw the consequences of the moral revolution as tragic, ultimately apocalyptic. He saw the rise of "mind," of reflective consciousness, not as a new and progressive activation of "axial" cognitive capacities, as Jaspers and more recently, Robert Bellah did, but rather as an unsustainable cleaving from the cosmos.

STUART-GLENNIE'S HISTORY OF RELIGION:

FIRST AGE OF HUMANITY

From Perceptive and Ritual Panzoooinism
Through
Spectacular Rituals of Civilized State Religions
To

SECOND AGE OF HUMANITY

(Centered Around 550-450 BCE)
The Moral Revolution
and
500 Year Dialectic Periods in the West
To

THIRD AGE OF HUMANITY

(Around the Year 2000)
Humanism

Figure 9.1. Stuart-Glennie's History of Religion

Ages	Jaspers	Stuart-Glennie
Prehistory	Insignificant	Significant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "panzoooinism" • "true intuitions of nature"
Civilization	Minor "islands of light"	Transition from supernal to supernatural
Moral Revolution / Axial Age	Pivotal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Man, as we know him today, came into being." 	Transitional Dialectic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supernaturalism • Differentiation of subjective and objective • Conflict of Greek Naturalism and Christianity
Modern	Insignificant	Significant As Humanism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through Science true intuitions clothed in true conceptions

Figure 9.2. Enduring Significance of Religious Ideas from Different Ages.

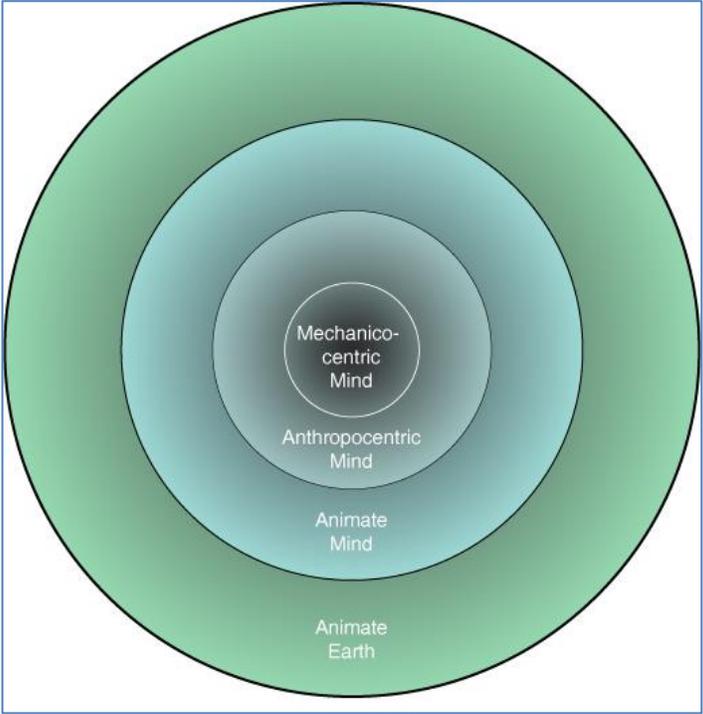


Figure 9.3 The Contractions of Mind