

The Symmetry Of History (Part Two)

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Last month, we looked at Karl Jasper's concept of an Axial Period in history, spanning roughly 800-200 BC. He viewed it as an unstable age characterized by a sea change in ideas as people abandoned old, long-standing ideas in philosophy and religion, replacing them with ideas that came to underpin the culture of late antiquity, particularly the Grecian and Roman civilizations. This thorough-going substitution of old ideas with different ones destabilized the period, leading ultimately to the death of even long-established empires like those of Egypt and Babylonia. For us, this period saw the fall and deportation of the House of Israel and the forced exile of the Jews at the hands of the Babylonians, attendant with the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple.

If history repeats itself, we should find, somewhere, sometime, a Second Axial Period, presumably of about the same length and with a matrix of characteristics and ramifications corresponding to the first one. That is, any Second Axial Period should exhibit a transformation of foundational ideas and a consequent gross destabilization of governmental structures.

Is there such a period in history? Is there a Second Axial Period, a reduplication of the first?

It Started with the Renaissance

Such a period did in fact begin in our era, about AD 1450, with the beginning of the Italian Renaissance. To see the march of events after that time as the Second Axial Period, we need to 1) demonstrate how different the Renaissance (and its aftermath) was from the Medieval Period just preceding it, and 2) show how relatively unstable the Renaissance (and its aftermath) was in terms of governments.¹

If this supposition of a Second Axial Period is valid, and if this second era is about as long as Jaspers' Axial Period, then it will end about 600 years after it started, or around the year AD 2050. That would place contemporary history—us—near the end of an Axial Period, on the cusp of a new civilization.

Different Ideas

Let us first look at the topic of the transformation of ideas. The ideas that arose during and after the Renaissance were indeed vastly different from the ideas that prevailed in later antiquity (in Greece and Rome), as well as from the notions operating in the Medieval Period. We will limit our discussion to the Medieval Period.²

Two defining characteristics of this time in history were its peoples' 1) widespread allegiance to the concept of authority, and related to this allegiance, 2) their commitment to structure in virtually every milieu. If it was anything, the Medieval Period was a time of authority and structure. Considering all its vast challenges (for example, the seemingly unending pandemic of the Black Death, the economic suffocation brought about by Catholicism, and the sometimes overt threat of the invasion of Islam at the hands of the Ottomans), it was a remarkably stable period.

The people of the Medieval Period were almost fixated on the idea of structure. They perceived this structure in terms of various hierarchical models. They had hierarchies for everything—hierarchies within hierarchies. An example is their view of the cosmos, embodied in the Harmony of the Spheres, a highly ordered—and, by that token, psychologically pleasing—conception of the interplay of sound, light, and geometry.

Graphically, they depicted the order of the universe (which was based on a geocentric model of the solar system) as a hierarchy. At its apex was God. Importantly, man was *not* the focus or centerpiece of their universe. God was. Not the true God, we understand, but God anyway, as distinct from man. The focus of the Medieval universe was on another world, heaven. The period's focus was not secular at all.

A hierarchical arrangement does not imply only order and structure; it suggests *authority* flowing from the top down. God is the highest authority. The Medieval man was absolute ruler of his household. The Medieval king possessed what was called a divine right and was answerable to no one except God. The Medieval popes, as vicars of Christ, were the final authority in everything religious.³

All this began to change drastically during the Renaissance. As that era progressed, the concept of authority and structure at all levels fell under attack. Man gradually replaced God as humanists denied Him as the final Authority.⁴ That act of presumptuous usurpation put people in a bind: How, in the face of the fact that there are lots of men, all with different ideas, talents, and ambitions, do you constitute a viable government?⁵ People living during and after the Renaissance thrashed that question around for decades and even centuries, posing different—and often conflicting—answers. The Constitution of the United States is one answer. Marx later had another answer.

The point is this: None of the answers mankind put on the table came even close to the concept of centralized authority and structure as *practiced* in the Medieval Period. They were different answers, different approaches. This was true in every discipline, not just that of political philosophy.

It may be useful to state the breadth of the change in ideas from the Medieval Period to the Renaissance in this way: The great works of the Renaissance and its aftermath could *not* have been created two centuries before the Renaissance started, say, in AD 1250. As examples, Michelangelo's statue of David, the music of Mozart, or the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* simply could not have been created in 1250. The ideas that undergird these cultural artifacts had not been developed by 1250. Those ideas may have existed in isolation in someone's mind in 1250, but they lacked currency then. They also lacked critical mass, that is, the broad-based societal support needed to permit them to grow and flourish. Therefore, these ideas got nowhere until they began to grab traction after about 1450—not until their time had come.

Because of this sea-change in ideas that started with the Renaissance, the Roman papacy came to lose much of its authority. Kings came to lose their authority with the rise of what is properly called liberal democracy, and so today, few monarchs hold any real power. The Bible came to lose its authority with the ascent of the so-called “higher criticism.” All this change took place as a result of different *ideas* that became current during and after the Renaissance.⁶ In short, this Second Axial Period *has* indeed been marked with huge changes in thinking. The seminal minds of our time, Einstein, Marx, Darwin, and Freud, belonged to individuals who deeply questioned traditional authority and the value of a highly structured society.

Over time, Medieval ideas about religion, science, ethics, the individual, and society came under attack. They were knocked down one after another as ideas buttressing the brave new world, ideas about secularism (which is really just atheism), socialism, and communitarianism, grabbed traction. These three—secularism, socialism, communitarianism—are the three legs of the stool we call the New World Order, now abuilding.

Insecure Empires Aplenty

How did this tsunami affect governments? Did the fall of the idea of unquestioned authority and of hierarchical structure destabilize the world of business and commerce? Yes. This maelstrom of changing ideas transpired in a context of unspeakable violence in the form of vast wars, genocides, pogroms, and dislocations, from the hideous and protracted wars sparked by the rise of Protestantism to the “Reign of Terror” caused later by the French Revolution. Inarguably, the twentieth century was the most violent in post-Deluge history, considering the two World Wars and the loss of life and property caused by dictators of the ilk of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao.⁷

Here is a partial list of the empires that have fallen since the Renaissance, since about AD 1450:

- » The Byzantine Empire fell in 1453, as if signaling the start of the Italian Renaissance. It had been around for some 1,200 years, since the days of the later Roman Emperors.
- » The Ottoman Empire (or Turkish Empire), which conquered the Byzantine Empire, itself fell in 1923, after strutting on the world’s stage for some six centuries. A person living in Germany or France in the 1400-1500’s would have been worried about being overrun by the Sunnis, the branch of Islam that the Ottoman Empire had forced on the Middle East and Northern Africa. The Ottomans, rivals of the Hapsburgs, penetrated central Europe, conquering as far north as Hungary. The Empire’s two attempts to take Vienna failed, however. The French actually were allied with the Ottomans for a time.
- » The vast Spanish Empire spread through much of South and Central America, with territories in Florida and the Philippines. Its far-point in North America was the Presidio at the mouth of the San Francisco Bay. Through royal intermarriage with the Hapsburgs in Austria-Germany, it became a rival to the Ottoman Empire.
- » The Russian Empire fell in 1917. It actually had settlements in Hawaii. Its far-point in North America was Fort Ross, located only 150 miles north of San Francisco.
- » The Portuguese Empire, which included Brazil and various holdings in Africa, was the longest-ruling European colonial empire, its last vestige becoming independent as recently as 2002.
- » The Inca Empire.
- » The Aztec Empire.
- » The Mayan Empire.
- » The Holy Roman Empire.

- » The German Empire.
- » The Italian Empire.
- » The Prussian Empire.
- » The Austria-Hungary Empire was one of a number of empires that bit the dust as a result of World War I.
- » The British Empire, on which the sun supposedly never set.
- » The Japanese Empire fell in 1945, to the ear-splitting sound of the detonation of nuclear weapons.
- » The Soviet Empire fell a couple decades ago.

Additionally, the Qing Dynasty of China (established in AD 1644) gave way to the Republic of China in 1912, which in turn gave way to the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949.

This seismic violence of the Second Axial Period⁸ will culminate in the establishment of a New World Order. That order will be so abusive of the environment and so destructive of human life that Christ will have to intervene to end it, lest there be none left alive, as Christ Himself pointed out in Matthew 24:22 (see also Revelation 11:18).

When that happens, the Second Axial Period will finally end. The World Tomorrow will have arrived.

Endnotes

¹ In point of fact, Jaspers' idea of an Axial Period of history has caught the imagination of a number of later writers. For example, Karen Armstrong, a religious historian of some controversy, has argued that the Age of Enlightenment, starting about AD 1650, represents the start of another axial period. Yves Lambert has written less cogently on the matter.

² As an interesting and pertinent aside, it is noteworthy that European and North American weather patterns changed markedly about AD 1250, at which time the Medieval Warm Period (also called the Medieval Climate Optimum and the Medieval Climate Anomaly) came to an end. Afterward, mean temperatures began to decrease in Europe and North America, throwing both areas into the Little Ice Age (AD 1500-1700). In the Medieval Period, the Vikings built agricultural colonies in Iceland, but by the late 1600s, the climate had cooled so much that these colonies were drawn down, as it had become too cool to grow crops. The Pilgrims, arriving in what is now Massachusetts in late fall 1620, experienced an unusually cold winter associated with the Little Ice Age. Historical climatology, which studies historical changes in climate and their effect on civilization, is a fascinating subject.

³ Often, the Pope's power superseded that of kings. Practically speaking, however, it needs to be said that strong popes, like Innocent III (1161-1216), were more effective in enforcing their role as Vicar than weak ones, as exemplified by the seven successive popes of the Avignon Papacy (1309-1378), all of whom resided in France rather than in Rome. During this period, the French Crown progressively became influential in papal matters. Because this period lasted (just short of) 70 years, it is sometimes termed the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy.

⁴ Finally, it came to the point that one philosopher, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), told us, "God is dead."

⁵ Remember how Herbert Armstrong used to speak about the fall of governments? This was one of the signs of the times he recognized, a sign of the end. Why does a government fall? Bottom line: It loses its authority in the eyes of the governed.

⁶ For lack of space, this discussion has purposefully sidestepped the areas of science and technology. Yet, even in these areas, we see the fall of ancient authority. Consider the case of Galen of Pergamon, an ancient Greek doctor and anatomist whose works were "required reading" by ancient and Medieval medical students. Galen recognized that the image falling on the retina was inverted, so he mentally "manufactured" a device in the eye that turned the image right-side-up again. Of course, no such device existed (except in Galen's "mind's eye"), yet Galen was the anatomical "authority" for centuries. Hundreds of medical students, dissecting human cadavers over the years, came to "see" this device in the eye, even though it was not there. It was left to Renaissance medical men to debunk Galen's fabrication. The same type of thing happened to the geocentric model of the solar system—a model that was promulgated in the ancient world. The Catholic Church firmly subscribed to it. Only as the authority of the Church "eclipsed" did the heliocentric model advance, especially after the formulations of Nicolaus Copernicus around 1543.

There are many examples of science (so-called) butting heads with the authority of the Catholic Church in the 1500s and following.

⁷ There were other despots after them, more locally, leaders like Pol Pot and Idi Amin.

⁸ As with the first Axial Period, it is hard to designate an actual pivot point in the Second Period, although some might cogently argue that the founding of the American Republic might be one. I prefer the tipping-point metaphor, positing two crucial tipping points in the Second Axial Period: first, God's removal of the 2,520-year punishment on the House of Israel, around AD 1800, and second, His removal of the 2,520-year punishment on Judah and the concomitant founding of the State of Israel in 1948.