



Is A Renewal Of The Axial Age Possible?

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Abstract: In this essay I explore the interrelated notions of axial existence and redemptive Truth. My concern is in regard to why their existential correlates, traditional Western spiritual life and Transcendent revelation, seem to be absent (missing), what this might mean, and what might be involved in their renewal. Part of my reflection engages the possibility that axial space may have been lost or that the anticipated arrival of a "new god" might engender or alter such a space. In this regard I am mindful of various sentiments regarding the preparation for and awaiting of "new gods" – most likely a highly metaphysical set of notions. Also considered is the seeming (and perhaps intractable) centrality of the financial to the American temperament. The cultural notion – European in resonance – that voids are endemic to our human lives, and the current American political scene with its growing negativity toward Government are reflected on as well. I explore whether the present attitude toward government, coming from many in society, may fit unusually well – however unwittingly and with crucial alterations – into a standard Christian theological model of salvation and its impediments. In the course of this exploration I reflect on a few ways in which the spiritual and the socio-economic may come to be significantly reconfigured in relation to each other. Not wishing to advocate any particular content, I end my thoughts with a meditation regarding ours as an in-between time of no longer and not yet, what I have elsewhere called a *thresholding* time.

Introduction

Motivation matters. At the time I was granted the opportunity to explore a possible renewal of the axial, a number of things were—and still are—constituents of my thinking. One is that the sense of transcendence has been ever increasingly on the wane and with it the notion of redemptive truth. By redemptive truth I have in mind a Reality that transcends us and contact with which would be capable of transforming us. Redemptive truth would be a truth in relation to which we would be patients, not agents, a truth that we would need to undergo, but could not be said to bring about. When Nietzsche, for example, and Hegel before

him said, "God was dead," it was the credibility of redemptive truth that was being disparaged, not the existence of specific facts of "the cat is on the mat" sort. To deny the existence of redemptive truth, thus, is by no means to undermine virtually countless worlds of fact, knowledge of which might bring about the cure of cancer, allow the invention of a more efficient methods of killing, illumine more effective means of reducing poverty, or simply inspire the invention of a new and even more dazzling 25GB widget.

In axial terms, redemptive truth might be equated with Reality, as opposed to Appearance. To claim that there is no redemptive truth, then, is the axial denial that there is any Reality. This is not to claim, however—

and this bears repeating—that there are no so-called "objective" facts. Even if axial Reality were absent, axial appearance would still be very much with us. There are and will remain many cats and many mats—and many X's and Y's still to be discovered through scientific experiment and theory. These X's and Y's will continue to be more elusive than cats and mats, of course. How we will conceive them, even a quarter of a century from now, no one can confidently say—though we can conclude with some certainty that their discoveries will not in and of themselves redeem us. More and more sophisticated and successful theories regarding them, however, are likely to speed us along our way to these various and sundry goals of our current and future imagining and choosing.

Why do I say that no new discovery or set of discoveries in a post-axial world of appearances could prove redemptive? In Heidegger's terms, why do I suggest that "only a god"—that is, only some constituent of Axial Reality itself and, thus, assuming its demise, only the renewal of the Axial—could save us?

At best I can only suggest, and thus not provide, adequate answers regarding why this is so, regarding why any post-axial human existence, however long its duration—decades or centuries—would and could never reach a transformative moment that was altogether post-axial. A consideration of this matter, however, even though it is bound to be inconclusive, is nonetheless worthy of some reflection.

I say this in part because of a short article that appeared some months after our current Jaspers Society program was put into place. Of all places, the article appeared in *The Economist* issue "The World in 2011." In sub-section "The World in 2036," the article "New era, new god, says Paul Saffo," reads as follows:

Over a century ago, Nietzsche observed, "Almost 2,000 years and no new God!" Indeed, though hundreds of new religions appear and disappear every year, it has been centuries since a truly new great religion has appeared on this planet. We are overdue for a new god.

Our current religious order formed in what Karl Jaspers termed the "axial age" – that extraordinary period between 800BC and 200BC that witnessed monotheism's move into the mainstream with Zoroastrianism, the appearance of Buddhism, the establishment of Confucianism and the efflorescence of Greek humanistic philosophy.

Jaspers's axial age shares close parallels with today. It was a time shaped by innovations in government, transport and communications. Population growth created new challenges demanding political

innovations. New sailing technology transformed the seas from barriers to highways for ideas that travelled with trade goods to new lands. The consequent intellectual ferment yielded new world views, new uncertainties – and new religions.

Three technologies have brought us to the edge of another axial shift today. Air travel has given entire populations unprecedented mobility. The intermodal container has delivered a cornucopia of products to every corner of the globe. And cyberspace has become a promiscuous, meme-spreading hotbed of ideas.

Throw in the usual round of human misery served up by war, revolution and natural disasters, and the result is a potent cultural Petri dish from which a new god could spring. Populations around the world are struggling to find security and identity in this strange new future-shock world. The rise of fundamentalism is a sure indicator of dissatisfaction with the current religious order. Unhappy believers first look back to their roots for comfort, but origins rarely comfort and thus they will inevitably search for a new god. (Paul Saffo is managing director, foresight, Discern Analytics, and is a visiting scholar at Stanford University.)¹

The reference to a "new god" is what I believe we should find most intriguing, even vital, whether in Heidegger, Saffo, or in anyone else who puts it into play. The anticipated relation of such a new reality to our seemingly waning axial time and existence lends itself to multiple interpretations. Their differences genuinely matter. Among other things, how such new gods come to be construed is likely to influence decisively any sort of forward-oriented future that the philosophy profession might have. Philosophy itself will surely always provide underpinnings that nourish the various forces that intellectual history takes, but will philosophy come again to do more? Metaphorically speaking, it is hard not to believe that this will be a matter for new gods to decide, if not through their pending presence, then through their enduring absence.

A new god might be construed as a newly arrived occupant of an old and ancient, but surviving axial space, a space now having lost its previous tenant. Traditionally this tenant has been understood as the God who, as Hegel and Nietzsche would have it, had died. More abstractly, it is the God who in the guise of Being had become for Hegel one with Nothing and

¹ Paul Saffo, "New era, new god, says Paul Saffo," in section "The World in 2011," *The Economist*, 25-year Special Edition, p. 112.

thereby could only generate Becoming. Always more accessible, if also more biting, Nietzsche referred to this same Being as nothing but a vacuous vapor, thereby a tenant of axial space that had not so much departed as evaporated.

More polytheistically rendered, any new god might be contemplated as a successor and replacement figure for various gods who have fled, whether ancient or modern, resident on Mount Olympus, in Beverly Hills or on an offshore island in the Bahamas running a hedge fund.

The account I have been adumbrating, however, is both too easy and too problematic. It is too easy and too problematic in that it tends simply to assume without much reflection that what is meant by the Axial Age is definitively a one and one time only event, whether wrought through mysterious bifurcation, focused explosion, or metaphysical redemption. Further assumed is that out of this spiritually metaphorical big bang came an epochal emergence, an unalterable, yet also disciplined transformation of the pre-axial into an axial "here" and an axial "beyond," a this-where and an else-where, something to remain or never to begin.

On this account, as we know, an irrevocably defining dualistic configuration, an enduring cosmic gestalt or episteme, allegedly arose some twenty five hundred years ago. Through it two distinct, yet intimately bonded domains were engendered in relation to each other. They were perhaps even demarcated negatively through each other. In accordance with this account it is our fate as humans to remain in this Axial Kingdom forever or to expire with it, giving way to some successor creature in some genuinely post-axial successor epoch.

What thereby seems to be suggested is that in terms of possible contours there has been and could only be one Axial Age. Residents of it may and do come and go, an historical truism, but the structure of the axial building would necessarily remain the same. If it were ever altogether to crumble, as human beings we would be eliminated as well. But should we believe that this account is true?

We know that in Classical Greek terms those two domains that comprised the Axial came to be understood as the realms of change and the unchanging, the transitory and the enduring, of time and the timeless. Though somewhat of a stretch, we might even attribute to the Greeks the further claim

that these domains were also describable as the realms of how things were and how things were meant to be.²

Were we to assume an account of the generic sort I have been sketching—a remaining upper-level axial space, vanishing occupants, and the expectation of a new arrival—an obvious question would confront us. It is in some ways a simple one: Did the evacuated space define its old, departing occupant, or did the departed occupant define and configure the now empty but lingering space? Underlying this question is a concern about alleged axial space itself. This concern has been rampant at least since the Enlightenment and, probably from the time of Copernicus, viz., whether the very notion of such a space, together with all its purported dimensions, might not be little more than the residual projections of primitive and as yet not fully comprehended human needs.

How these issues are resolved, these concerns met, is crucial to how we will come to view the axial age itself, axial existence, whether it is construed as significantly metaphysical or merely psychological, and thus, how we come to understand any possible successors to the lives and varying worlds that have been spawned by axially oriented human beings. It is also likely that science, and the exploration of the so-called God-gene will contribute as well to our future understanding of what has defined us as human beings.

If the first alternative is taken—axially evacuated space having defined its occupant or occupants—a new god could be construed as a cure for the experience of spiritual emptiness, whether genuine or imagined, and thus as a motivation to live through that particular species of nihilism fostered through having suffered uncomprehended abandonment. Any new god would then become a solution to nihilism only available on its other side.

If nihilism marks the loss of resonance within the transcendent pole of axial existence, thereby rendering human life unipolar, yet inescapably still in an axial space that is bipolar in its dimensions, the anticipated arrival of a new god gives justification for endurance. It

² If we were to go this far, however, we would also need to worry about the distinction between how something is meant to be and how it ought to be. These are not the same nor does either entail the other. To complicate matters further, neither how something is meant to be nor how it ought to be necessarily speaks directly and unambiguously to how that same something simply is.

cannot but remind us of Heidegger's claim in his *Einführung in die Metaphysik* that "to know how to question is to know how to wait, even a whole lifetime...."

Our time, thus, might be construed as a waiting room or, even, as a kind of incubator—one in which certain reflections and observations, an exercise that I have called "thresholding" in my earlier writings, are given a space in which to grow and to develop. At the same time, a supportive conversational environment might thereby be nurtured through which the waiting period is likely to be made more tolerable for those who anticipate some new arrival. A process would then be undergone, a constructive transformation, that could make it more possible to even recognize any new god.

Answers arrive in their own time, and in their own way. If nothing else, the spiritual history of humanity has taught us that attempts to invent, manage, manipulate or sell answers to transcendent religious questions have had their share of impoverishing and usually destructive consequences. At the same time, however, preparation and a place must be made for what we might call "godly answers." Such places are often challenging and problematic harbingers of the new. Almost always they are also targets of derision and scorn.

Much of the needed preparation involves cultivating the inwardness and deepening the experience of those who would be bearers of the new, of those who would wish, or who experience themselves as compelled to reach out beyond the oppressive closures of our era. I speak of those who might become vehicles of our era's impending transformation, thereby functioning as rays of hope and new light and managing thereby to avoid the traditional recycling of "old and tried" as well as "new age" solutions to abiding metaphysical concerns.

Historically, stirrings of spiritual reorientation have been quite noteworthy and have deserved attention. The United States, for example and as we know, was greatly influenced in its founding and development by Enlightenment agendas stemming from Europe, particularly France, in the eighteenth century. Not the least of these involved the gradual replacement of superstition, a coded epithet for religion, by reason, education, and the spread of Western values that were construed as universal in scope and secular in nature.

Be this as it may, in our time we will do well to concentrate further on the particular economic focus that has come to drive so much of our thinking. Of the

four pillars of our present civilized world—the promotion of economic growth, the attack upon evil, the defense of human rights and, most problematically, an openness to the potentially differing orientations of others—financial damage and its lingering effects have surely become most central.

It is as if to secure genuine hope and a space for the human spirit to flourish—a comfortable post- and pre-axial waiting room—a firm economic foundation must first be restored and put into place. It is thought by many that only then could the characteristic and emotional-spiritual wherewithal be found to defend human rights, withstand and eliminate evil and, possibly, become more confidently inclusive within and beyond the society at large. It is even possible, though an extraordinarily controversial claim, that only through some sort of economic reorientation could any deeper renewal take place.

That the financial should have become central, if not fundamental, is in itself the consequence of factors both historical and contemporary. To claim that these factors are tangled would be an extreme understatement.

What, we must ask, would be the consequences if the waning axial spirit increasingly comes to exist, if only by default, in the service of a secularly focused success. Would the receding space of the axial "beyond" then serve largely as a stage prop, motivator or performance-enhancing over-the-counter medication? Little could be further from that orientation upon which axial life has always been nourished—which is not to deny that axial values have served inspirationally in the pursuit of various worldly ventures as well, e.g., the building of cathedrals, the waging of crusades, and the remediation of poverty and disease.

To bring our contemporary situation further into focus we may also benefit from looking into what we will provisionally and transitionally refer to as the void. As we know, this notion and the underlying experiences that promoted it gained considerable currency less than a century ago, primarily in Europe. Partly as a consequence of two major wars, extraordinary economic hardship and significant political instability, if not occasional chaos—economic circumstances not altogether unlike our own—European thinkers such as Sartre, Foucault, and later Derrida and others came to view human life as largely misled, especially if grounded in beliefs in an all powerful and beneficent God. That the Holocaust occurred, one in fact of many genocides, only intensified the sense among many that human life was

merely meaningless, at worst a despairing journey to nowhere, at best a precarious, ever threatened pursuit of stability, security, and episodic and fleeting moments of satisfaction and enjoyment that could never be assured.

Even though Americans themselves went through a great depression of their own in the nineteen thirties, the absence of war on their own soil, coupled with an overwhelming and justified sense of having provided the major resources for victory over evil forces, especially in the Second World War, has until recently only reinforced our optimistic "can do" attitude. This indigenous American philosophy has long since been labeled "pragmatism," and it has been taken to mean many things. For our purposes of the moment let us understand it as the belief that metaphysical concerns do not finally matter. What does decisively matter, it is thought, is the power of will and where there is the will, there surely will be a way.

History does not repeat itself, but as Mark Twain was proud of saying, it surely does tend to rhyme. Now in the twenty-first century, our American self-assurance, buttressed by the extraordinary and growing wonders of internet technology, is surely undergoing a severe and sustained test, first brought about through the unpredictable, cruel, and continuing activities of terrorists and then intensified and accelerated by that near meltdown—and its unceasing fallout—that we associate especially with Wall Street in the autumn of 2008 when our financial system was said to be close to a collapse.

It is surely highly doubtful that Americans will experience a retrospective conversion to those existential-European ruminations, even agonies, over a looming void that I have just mentioned, what has been referred to by some as "an encounter with nothingness." But we may nonetheless come to appreciate the underlying temperament of those earlier times a little more, particularly in the light of continuing foreclosures, joblessness, and stagnant wages at best and a fall into chronic poverty an ever expanding and demoralizing possibility for many.

Set against this and well worth some closer attention is that recent manifestation of the American pragmatic spirit that is popularly labeled the Tea Party movement. Without turning our attention to judgmental politics, whether positive or negative, let us note that philosophically this movement extols self-reliance, willpower, and the confident sense that nearly all is possible in this world, if we depend only upon ourselves and our families—and, possibly, on our local

communities and, for many, upon God. (Here the members of the Tea Party tend to diverge, the so-called libertarian wing suspiciously distancing itself from community, the conservative wing guardedly embracing it.)

Government gets understood largely as an impediment, an obstacle that overhangs and burdens the muscular and moral wonders of the best of the American spirit. Except in extreme circumstances such as overt war (or as an ambivalently adopted requirement for job creating corporate profit and growth), American individualism, we know, has lived uneasily with highly organized and regulated effort. This is seen as discouraging to innovation and creativity.

We now find ourselves in a very disturbing situation, however, in which neither individual effort, perhaps stymied by government, nor governmental assistance, perhaps stymied by taxpayer resistance, seems to hold out immediate promise. On the financial front, where all of us must live our lives regardless of our religious convictions, we are in highly unusual, though not altogether unique circumstances. Over the course of the last few years, we have transferred enormous amounts of our personal debt, whether voluntarily or through coercion, to governmental repositories.

At the same time, strong currents of conviction are mounting that we should deny the government as debt-holder of last resort the means of servicing that very debt. Some claim that this course of action will foster, if not decisively bring into being the irreversible conditions for socio-economic convulsion, others that such a program is the only route to recovery and worldly stability and prosperity. If Hegel is right—that philosophy must be its time comprehended in thought—then we must pay attention to such matters. If Jaspers was to search out various dimensions of German guilt, we must explore philosophically the quandaries of our own American situation.

As thresholders, open but not committed to the axial, we take no stance with respect to this great and growing political divide. Ours is the path of observation, not advocacy nor action. Observation itself is actually an activity in its own right. It is challenging in the resolute openness and benign restraint it demands.

At the risk of invoking a measure of understandable discomfort, however, and in a few quarters some anguish, I offer an imperfect, but nonetheless helpful analogy drawn from conventional Western theology. In no way is any sacrilege intended. At the same time, in our erratically unfolding twenty-

first century, we are edging closer and closer to a confrontation with the very meaning of money. Such an encounter, of course, is also and perhaps in a majority of ways a secular, socio-political event. It may primarily be this. An occurrence of this nature, however—saturated in issues of meaning—is unavoidably spiritual as well and therefore cannot but exude resonances that bear striking, even disturbing resemblance to paradigmatically religious themes and scenarios. But let us now go directly to the core of a thought-provoking and controversial analogy.

Where would we be if the sins of the world—I should add that in terms of the etymological inheritance we receive from the Greeks and Romans, "debt," "sin," and "guilt" overlap and commingle—were thrown upon and taken up by a savior figure, perhaps a government, and that figure was then prevented from carrying out the required work, the mission of restitution? Of course, there are many responses available and quite obviously (and encouragingly so) they diverge dramatically:

- * There are false saviors;
- * The partial crucifixion, though by no means subsequent resurrection of government may be exactly what we need and, thus, is necessary to our restoration;
- * Without aid from somewhere beyond, we ourselves will surely suffer destruction.

Without doubt, other ways of drawing such central theological analogies are available, and even the three just noted can be partially combined through selective and critical reflection on various complications and distinctions that each may in its own particular way evade or disregard. As a point held in common among these otherwise contending parties, however, it is hard to imagine any of them viewing government as anything more than an enabler at best.

Government is viewed as an often-dysfunctional intermediary, humanly cobbled together. It is certainly not construed as a transcendent deity, not as an axial reality now resident within our human scene as a visitor whose spiritual citizenship is elsewhere, located in a beyond, in a metaphysical realm that the axial temperament has so strongly believed in and has so often desperately and destructively sought.

At the same time, one of the historical developments in the wake of which we now live—and the future of which is unknown and unpredictable—has been the progressive transference of emotional focus and intensity from the religious to the political and, over the last decades especially, to the economic. The fragility of our financial world, both overtly

obvious and in underlying ways possibly even more ominous, only exacerbates this trend.

Whereas some time ago our conversations might have more occasionally tended toward worries regarding the path to salvation, putting the merits of doctrinal correctness against good deeds or the strength and enthusiasm of spiritual feeling, over the last few centuries conversations have circled more around the merits of centralized, if often ill-informed and cumbersome political decision-making versus the dispersed, if sometimes inconsistent and somewhat chaotic virtues of participatory democracy.

Even more recently—a consequence of the increasing capture of politics by economics—both intellectual and everyday discourse has more frequently, some say obsessively, focused on monetary policy, fiscal priorities, asset allocations, retirement planning, interest rates, unemployment compensation, and the cost of real estate, goods, and services. We have been moving from the divide between faith and reason, salvation and damnation, though the argument between statists and individualists, to controversies between inflationists and deflationists, stimulus package advocates and bond-market disciplinarians. Will our money have increasing or decreasing value, become worth more or less? Will a very small amount of it someday buy hundreds of wheelbarrows, or might all the money in the world buy only a few or even none. Of course, these are exaggerated apocalyptic scenarios, but they highlight and thereby help bring into focus a trend. Will there be a moderately comfortable life after birth, how long can it be expected to last and what are the measures, the pricing mechanisms and predictors that might accurately anticipate life's direction and course?

Axial concerns over our ultimate metaphysical destination and destiny, and axial agonies over our sources of our salvation and the qualities we might need to achieve it, have not exited our contemporary scene by any means. At the same time, as I have claimed from the beginning of my remarks, these axially motivated preoccupations have been receding and cannot but be said to be in retreat. If they do not come to be somewhat strengthened and brought more into our recent twenty-first century discourse, Adam Smith and even the early Karl Marx would at first be slightly puzzled and then, clearly in Adam Smith's case, slightly horrified. Whether our current trend is decisive, or, if it is not, becomes so and thus becomes irreversible, we cannot know. That we are near or at a tipping point, momentous in its likely consequences, is

incontrovertible. It is one thing to speak of epochal transitions, but it would be quite something else to live through one.

The pervasive and expanding miracle of technology allows, almost coerces us to observe many of the phenomena and trends we have been citing. We are surrounded by ticker symbols and stock prices, whether in restaurants, airports or even in the potentially foreclosed safety of our homes through the means of potentially repossessed, often high definition television sets. And this is the situation of those lucky (or is it unlucky?) and decreasing few who have what are often deteriorating assets to track and, to the degree possible, preserve. If these people do poorly, one can only imagine how those lower down on the income scale, and dependent upon the fortunate, if dwindling few, will fare.

Times are clearly different. Axial culture as we have understood it, a way of life whose era largely superseded warrior culture and its particular honor codes, has spawned nearly twenty-five hundred years of world history. But we have to consider that it may be coming to a fitful and problematic end in our time. For the axial mind, we know, there has been a world other than and beyond this one, what some philosophers have called a metaphysical realm. Axially, it is closeness to and ultimate residence in this realm that genuinely matters. For the axial temperament the world in which we now find ourselves is but a weigh-station and pathway on the road to eternity. Those values the adoption of which would qualify us for our true residence, final destination and real axial home, however, are at the very best merely compatible with worldly success, particularly the acquisition of material wealth.

Judeo-Christian teachings, for example, draw an unambiguously sharp distinction between serving God and serving Mammon and cast severe doubt on any sustainable human capacity to serve both. The pursuit of wealth is construed as an actual impediment to spiritual growth and preferment. Poverty is extolled and, in fact, vows of poverty are common to many spiritual orders that have underwritten and promoted axial modes of living. The Dominicans are one example, but there are many others and they have flourished both before and beyond Christianity. (We draw the majority of our examples from the matrix of Christianity primarily because of its centrality and dominance in the historical and cultural development of the West.)

However much various capital and market oriented religious believers might have it otherwise, the sayings of Jesus most credibly documented, for example, are far more to the left than to the right of the contemporary politico-economic spectrum. Had he given matters of this nature any concentrated thought, he would probably have been a redistributionist and thereby labeled a socialist in the parlance of contemporary political rhetoric. But, as indicated more than once in the Christian Bible, his Kingdom was not of this world, as surely axial an orientation as is imaginable.

Significantly, the active sharing and distribution of worldly possessions was a common activity among member of the early churches, not to gain admittance to Heaven, but to reinforce the orientation of the devoted toward an end of time in which this world would either pass away or be consumed in a fiery apocalypse. Contrasting eschatological visions—one of a cataclysmic convulsion, another of a velvet revolution—have been deeply integral to our human mentality for countless centuries. They have needed neither Karl Marx nor Enlightenment-era progressive reformists to breathe life into them.

Again, I mention phenomena such as these not to take specific issue with one particular faith and certainly not with a view toward endorsing or attacking the axial mode of existing in our world. My stance is that of thresholding, regarding which there are various things to say. Among other of its defining features, to be a thresholder is to recognize and anticipate the arrival of an extraordinary moment of transition, an historical punctuation point of considerable consequence. At the same time, however, to be a thresholder is not to take sides, nor to prescribe remedies or resolutions, whether in the form of political action, religious commitment or economic policy. For prescriptions such as these it is probably too early, though they are already being written and acted upon in diverse and contentious ways in the world around us. In this sense, thresholding, to say it again, is far more observation than action, though as a human undertaking—perhaps one of the most appropriate and fundamental ones of our time—it invariably spawns a measure of insight and with it both reminders and, tentatively, also some recommendations.

As we know, Christianity has been quite central to the West and its multiform culture, and we cannot but note the strength it now enjoys among the growing numbers of those whose allegiance is characterized as being to the political right. Regarding this particular

configuration of circumstances a number of things might profitably be said.

Partly through the now dimming lenses of classical Protestantism—the doctrines of Martin Luther and John Calvin—worldly progress and success have come to be seen by many both as a sign of and a pathway toward right living and even blessedness. Not only this, pursued sincerely, proper belief and personal appeal to God have come to be seen as means to the achievement of worldly success as well. In this, of course, there is nothing altogether new, but the growing fusion of religious beliefs with expectations of worldly accomplishments has been spreading and intensifying in numerous ways. It is as if in many cases the religious sphere is construed less as a higher sphere and destination in itself than as an enhancing accessory and means to other, quite worldly and specifically material goals.

By way of illustration we might note the athlete with finger pointed toward the sky after the moment of supreme achievement, whether it be a home run or a touchdown. Does this indicate gratitude for having been endowed with athlete gifts and a disciplined reminder of their source? This might be. Equally, however, "God" may be receiving an acknowledgement for having rendered an assist, the real credit belonging to the game's star of the moment, the hitter of the home run or the thrower or receiver of the touchdown pass.

This may well seem to be a small and overly subtle distinction, a carping over miniscule matters of no real consequence. But we may also be arriving at a celebrity documented and accelerated tipping point in these seemingly late stages of our axial modes of living. Are we becoming increasingly secular without quite realizing it, aided in this (self) deception by emotional and other paraphernalia drawn from a spiritual outlook we are now actually, though gradually and even self-deceptively abandoning or being abandoned by? And, were this to prove to be the case, would it be a bad thing? Would it need to be counted as a loss rather than a gain? There are neither easy nor obvious answers to these questions. What might be on the other side of a relatively complete dissolution of axial belief? We could be finding out during this century, perhaps sooner rather than later.

Note that over the course of our recent reflections we have not only used the phrase "in this world," but have also focused on what many might view as concerns far removed from the religious pilgrimage and travails of the human spirit. As church and state were once rather decisively disjoined—though now

precariously and contentiously so and in a dwindling way—must not a clear distinction be drawn between God and Mammon, between nourishment for the soul and enhancements of our material standards of living? After all, as we well know, one of the central contemporary developments we have been describing, the rise of the Tea Party movement is far from secular in many of its attitudes and much of its orientation. That it has real world agendas and serious economic principles does not automatically discredit it, of course, as spiritually inauthentic. It is in fact robustly religious in ways to which we have already been alluding without then explicitly evaluating.

We also cannot rule out the possibility that the religious and the socio-economic can and perhaps eventually must be combined in a new synthesis. Both spiritual and economic histories are continually being made, not just rhymed or repeated. For numerous decades, a largely repetitive argument has been waged between those who have sought to translate traditional religious concerns into crusades against poverty and social injustice—the left leaning social gospel and liberationist theology movements are prime examples—and those who would have religion be a quite private, doctrinal, and in focus otherworldly affair. Might this deadlock already be fading away into the past, as have its major advocates: species of socialism on the one side and theologically oriented Protestantism on the other?

Perhaps a "right" leaning, free market, and low tax orientation could combine with sincere spiritual values that were translated into action. Might this overcome a stagnant God versus Mammon divide? Though cynics have sometimes rather uncharitably referred to such a synthesis as the "Wall Street Jesus" congregation, it need not be wedded to the recklessness of high finance, nor need it be enamored with the unpredictable consequences of globalization. In any case, it bears careful watching as a dynamic, if often disconcerting twenty-first century phenomenon.

But there is more to consider. To bring our current situation into better focus we also need to look further into that quite mysterious and potentially destabilizing phenomenon that we have provisionally referred to as the void. It is a most unusual reality, difficult to describe and virtually the antithesis of much of what we have been reflecting upon so far. Some might claim that even to bring the void into consideration is a symptom of self-indulgence or adolescence, if not a blatantly nihilistic detour.

One of the void's underlying resonances appears to be the sense that things no longer have meaning, at least meaning that one could depend upon. Coupled with this is the sense of having lost direction and finding oneself in an empty, almost featureless territory with no reliable signs nor maps by which to be guided back into familiar territory or toward a new, though at least comprehensible domain.

Brought directly into our popular culture some years ago through the lyrics of Bob Dylan's song "No Direction Home," it is precisely that uneasy feeling that we have somehow been displaced. It is the feeling that we are thereby without the supportive presence of a genuine home in this world in which we find ourselves caught up. A sense of futility is experienced by many amidst various recurrent and dislocating frustrations. That sense of belonging, of groundedness, and those reassurances provided through various forms of connectedness seem to have been dissolving. A vast literature is emerging regarding this theme.

Should we view this as anything more than the effects of those bruising thoughts that we might expect during very hard times? Or might something else, something deeper and more disturbing underlie this sense of being unmoored? Is the experience of an emptiness to life, of something inexplicable being missing, a symptom of pathology? Does it indicate some illness for which a certain medication might be sought? Or is it the harbinger of some genuine, if inchoate insight into the way things currently are at a level not finally reached through financial or political analysis? Could our ambition for financial gain and the acquisition of consumer products ever fill this particular void? The question, of course, is ancient, but its relevance is recurrent.

The notion of a void—or of nothingness—is, as we well know, not altogether new. We also find it in the Hebrew Bible, what the Christians refer to as the Old Testament, in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. It might help us further, perhaps, were we to replace the notion of void with that of nothingness. Of course, at least initially, any notion of nothingness must sound baffling. Rudolf Carnap made part of his philosophical living by lampooning Heidegger regarding it.

We are offered some help, however, from Ludwig Wittgenstein, who once said that it was better to call something a "nothing," than to call it something about which nothing could articulately be said. Are we currently not so much in a state of delusion as in one of inarticulation? This might very well be a living in an in-between-time. A living in the wake of a "no longer" in

which something most difficult to communicate has passed away, but where we find ourselves caught up in wary anticipation of a "not yet," while anticipating a future time in which something new and possibly reorienting may (or also may not) arrive and come into focus.

Severely transitional times, of course, are not new to the human spirit and are perhaps remarkably recurrent in the West. Some say that there have been many, the last truly extraordinary one being that of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century with its concerted, sometimes revolutionary pursuit of secular ideals. Whatever the case may be, in the course of reflecting on such possibilities, we have been taking up numerous spiritual issues that are both old and new. I believe that their relevance to our time is unquestionable.

It is disturbing to note that this void or region of emptiness has been a central, if subterranean dimension of contemporary life. We can see attempts to express it in some form or other in much of contemporary art, music, and literature. It would seem to contradict the dynamics of that religious athleticism of the human spirit that we mentioned a few moments ago.

What to say? The waiting room needs to be enlarged. The windows need to be opened and circulating air made available for new or returning gods. A newly awaited god may arrive one day, and axial life may continue its extraordinary path toward eternity. It is in the spirit of Jaspers that this axial possibility become and remain truly open.