



Living Earth Community

Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing

EDITED BY

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18. Gaia and a Second Axial Age

Sean Kelly

For the first time in sixty-five million years, the Earth community is being drawn into a collective, planet-wide near-death experience (NDE). While NDEs are known to occur spontaneously, they (or their experiential or symbolic analogues) have also been intentionally cultivated in all traditional societies as an essential moment of rites of passage or initiation. In all such rites, the initiation and its confrontation with death are not random events, but intentional processes, guided or lured by a specific goal. They are, in technical terms, teleological in nature (from *telos*: purpose, goal). For individual initiations, the purpose or goal involves the emergence of a new identity (whether of shaman, healer, chief, warrior etc.), an identity molded to serve the interests of the wider community. Something similar is happening in our times with regard to the threshold on which the Earth community now finds itself poised. In this case, however, we are dealing with the emergence of a radically new kind of identity or subject on a planetary scale. I use the word *Gaia* here as it seems, more than any other I have encountered, to be a kind of strange attractor for many of the more creative manifestations of the emerging planetary identity.

Though accelerating in our own times, the emergence of this new identity has in fact long been in the making. Over two centuries ago now, G. W. F. Hegel announced that 'ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labor of its own transformation...'¹ We are still in this period of transition, but the pace has quickened and the stakes are higher than

1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 6.

Hegel could have imagined: not only the five-thousand year old fabric of civilization, but that of life itself on a planetary scale. With runaway climate change and the mass extinction of species well underway, we can legitimately say that we live in end times (*eschaton*). Whether or not, on the other side of the *eschaton*, a better — or at least a viable and potentially flourishing — world awaits us, depends upon how we navigate the next decade or so.

Hegel was not the first to announce the dawning of a new age. He stood quite consciously in a long line of prophet-seers, from his immediate Enlightenment predecessors (Kant, Condorcet), through the mystic Jacob Boehme and the pivotal figure of Joachim di Fiore, all the way to St. Paul and the ‘veil-lifting’ (*apocalypsis*) claims of the New Testament. I have argued elsewhere that the birth and ongoing transformation of the modern period, or Planetary Era, is prefigured in certain central Biblical symbols which act, in William Blake’s expression, as the ‘Great Code’ not only of art and literature, but of the deeper patterning of world history.² Whether or not one agrees with my argument, one can perhaps grant the deep resonance between our planetary moment and the New Testament’s heightened sense of living in end times with a longing for a New Age.

Though falling outside its assigned limits, the Christianity of the New Testament is nevertheless a hybrid product of the earlier great transformation that Karl Jaspers termed the Axial Age. So much of what was to become the foundations of the world’s great religions, major philosophies, and dominant worldviews were laid down from the eighth to the third centuries BCE, the period Jaspers assigned to the Axial Age. With the near simultaneous emergence around the sixth century BCE of the first Greek philosophers (from Thales and Pythagoras to Plato), the Buddha, Mahavira, Confucius, and Lao Tzu, the great Jewish prophets (Second Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah), and possibly Zoroaster, this period ‘gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity’. It is during this period ‘that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being’.³ If Jaspers were

2 Sean Kelly, *Coming Home: The Birth and Transformation of the Planetary Era* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2010).

3 Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. by Michael Bullock (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315823683>

alive today, he might see our own times as straddling ‘the most deepcut dividing line in history’. He might as well have come to believe, as many do today, that we are witness to the dawning of a Second Axial Age.

While the idea of a Second Axial Age seems originally to have been proposed by Thomas Berry, the first extended treatment in print was by Ewert Cousins, who summarized his understanding as follows:

Having developed self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness in the First Axial Period, we must now, while retaining these values, reappropriate and integrate into that consciousness the collective and cosmic dimensions of the pre-Axial consciousness. We must recapture the unity of tribal consciousness by seeing humanity as a single tribe. And we must see this single tribe related organically to the total cosmos. This means that the consciousness of the twenty-first-century will be global from two perspectives: (1) from a horizontal perspective, cultures and religions are meeting each other on the surface of the globe, entering into creative encounters that will produce a complexified collective consciousness; (2) from a vertical perspective, they must plunge their roots deep into the earth in order to provide a stable and secure base for future development. This new global consciousness must be organically ecological, supported by structures that will ensure justice and peace. In the Second Axial Period this twofold global consciousness is not only a creative possibility to enhance the twenty-first century; it is an absolute necessity if we are to survive.⁴

The dominant strands of first Axial traditions tended to emphasize the transcendent pole in the vertical dimension (as we see in Platonic and the later Cartesian dualisms; Christian otherworldliness; Hindu and Buddhist views of the ‘wheel of life’ as illusion or trap; in Chinese cosmology, the immovable Pole star as symbol of Heavenly power and virtue, or the Daoist immortals). In the extreme, according to Robert Bellah, these dominant strands involved ‘the religious rejection of the world characterized by an extremely negative evaluation of man and society and the exaltation of another realm of reality as alone true and infinitely valuable’.⁵ At the same time, while the first Axial Age involved a new consciousness of the universal in its noetic, cosmic,

4 Ewert Cousins, *Christ of the 21st Century* (Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1992), p. 10, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472550200>

5 Robert Bellah and Hans Joas, eds, *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 194, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674067400>

and ethical dimensions, the several axial epiphanies of the universal remained rooted in the exclusive (ethno-linguistic) particularities of their respective culture spheres, and therefore in both of these senses the universal was abstract. 'Great as the major figures of the axial age were', as Bellah would note in his last and greatest work,

and universalistic as their ethics tended to be, we cannot forget that each of them considered his own teaching to be the only truth or the highest truth, even such a figure as the Buddha, who never denounced his rivals but only subtly satirized them. Plato, Confucius, Second Isaiah, all thought that it was they and they alone who had found the final truth. This we can understand as an inevitable feature of the world so long ago.⁶

A central task of the Second Axial Age, by contrast, involves the articulation of new forms of universality which could mediate between the particular culture spheres and help them confront their shared predicament: the threat of planet-wide ecological and civilizational collapse.

Despite the astounding synchronicity of first Axial Age, it was not global or planetary in extent, and its various representatives were largely unconscious of the parallel developments outside of their own culture spheres. At the same time, however — and as I have argued in detail in *Coming Home* — it was the destiny of one late, hybrid, shoot (Christianity) of this first axial mutation to become the symbolic catalyst or lure for the eventual emergence, some fifteen hundred years later, of the Planetary Era (more commonly designated as the modern period). It is with this specific genealogical line that we can discern an answer to the question of the relation between the two Axial Ages: the central symbols of Incarnation (of Spirit into matter, of the Logos into Cosmos, of the eternal into time) and of God as Trinity (the Absolute as internally differentiated) prefigure the deep structure of the movement from the first to the second Axial Age, with Modernity as the middle term between both Ages. The first Axial Age sets up the conditions of possibility for the eventual emergence of the second. These conditions include the reflexive and critical consciousness associated with 'metacognition/theoretic culture' (M. Donald); the 'disembedding'

6 Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 602, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674063099>

(Charles Taylor) of culture from the cosmos and of the individual from the collective; and the lure of the universal (Eric Voegelin, Jan Assmann).⁷ At a deeper level, both ages can and should be seen as the two poles of a single process, or rotating axis, moving from the abstract to the concrete in three broad phases: (i) an initial identity (in this case, structured around the central myth/symbol of Incarnation wedded to the Greek intuition of the universal as logos/cosmos); (ii) a movement of differentiation — and later, dissociation (leading to the birth of modern science, the modern disengaged subject, and the broader processes of secularization; all of which bring about the birth of the Planetary Era and the accelerating planetary crisis); (iii) a new Gaian, or *Gaianthropic* identity in the making.⁸ The cultivation of this new identity is a central task of the Second Axial Age, which itself can be seen as the ‘opportune moment’ (*kairos*) for the actualization of the deeper telos of the 2,500-year Axial Aion. My proposal for the periodization of the larger arc that encompasses the two Axial Ages is as follows.

Axial Aion (c. 800BCE to present):

First Axial Age (c. 800–200BCE)

Planetary Era (c. 1500CE to present)

Second Axial Age (Gaian epoch or Gaianthropocene) (c. 1945?–)

In contrast to the abstract universals that dominated the first Axial traditions, the new Gaian identity exemplifies the real-ideal of concrete universality. The universality of Gaia consists most obviously in the fact that it is in and through Gaia that we live and have our being. Gaia is the *ground* of what we all share in *common*. For the same reason, this universality is concrete, to begin with, in the sense that the physical systems studied by Earth System science constitute the *shared*, living

7 M. Donald, ‘An Evolutionary Approach to Culture: Implications for the Study of the Axial Age’, in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, pp. 47–76, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674067400.c3>; Charles Taylor, ‘What was the Axial Revolution?’, in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, pp. 30–46, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674067400.c2>; Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1974); Jan Assmann, ‘Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age’, in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, pp. 366–408, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674067400.c15>

8 See Sean Kelly, ‘Cosmological Wisdom and Planetary Madness’, *Tikkun Magazine*, 11 November 2015, <https://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/cosmological-wisdom-planetary-madness>, for my introduction of this term.

body of the entire Earth community. It is also concrete, however, in the specifically Hegelian sense that it, or She, is *auto-poietic* or *self-organizing* (the foundational insight of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis' Gaia Theory), which is to say that Gaia is a *Subject* (as well as a communion of subjects, and not a mere collection of objects).

The actualization of concrete universality that I see as the guiding spirit of the Second Axial Age will depend upon the successful coordination of multiple initiatives, both theoretical and practical, across the full spectrum of human endeavor. Here I will focus on some key features of the theoretical. If the First Axial Age was associated with the emergence of theoretic culture, with its second-order thinking, metacognition, and radical mytho-speculation, the Second Axial Age is marked by what could be described as third-order metacognition and a new (planetary) radical mytho-speculation. Integrating the critical, reflexive virtues of first-Axial theoretic culture, the leading edge of theory in the Second Axial Age recognizes the destructive potential of the disembedded, disengaged subject (which reduces the world to a mere collection of objects). It re-embeds the human subject into the living Earth and cosmos — or rather renews consciousness of the fact, and mystery, of its ontological consubstantiality with Earth and cosmos — which are now seen, celebrated, and engaged with as a communion of subjects. More radically, we can say that the radiating center of the second Axial Age is constituted by an awareness — a third-order metacognition — in a growing network of individuals and communities, that 'We live in that time when Earth itself begins its adventure of conscious self-awareness'.⁹

This awareness is informed and catalyzed by many distinct, if overlapping, disciplines, including Earth System science, Big History, the various strands of ecological science and environmental studies, the field of religion and ecology, and the emerging transdiscipline of integral ecology. For our purposes, I would single out the generative contributions of Thomas Berry, one of the founders of integral ecology and, along with Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and others, bard or prophet of a more coherent and inspiring Big, or better, Deep History. 'We need to think of the planet', Berry writes, 'as a single, unique,

9 Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 109.

articulated subject to be understood in a story both scientific and mythic [and, I would add, ethical and political]'.¹⁰

In the variety of Big History associated with David Christian, Earth or Gaian evolution is conceived as currently poised on 'Threshold 9' (the previous eight thresholds are: (1) origin of universe; (2) formation of stars and galaxies; (3) formation of heavier chemical elements; (4) formation of Earth and the solar system; (5) emergence of life; (6) birth of *homo sapiens*; (7) agricultural revolution; (8) the modern revolution, or what I call the Planetary Era). Christian has little to say about this new evolutionary threshold, other than underlining its radically uncertain character (which in any case attaches to the emergent properties associated with all new thresholds) and the possibility, at least, of somehow achieving a sustainable planetary civilization. Futurist and Big Historian Joseph Voros concludes soberly that the most likely path ahead involves 'a slowly-unfolding collapse or "descent" over a time-scale of decades-to-centuries towards a human society characterized by ever-declining access to sources of fossil fuel-based energy'.¹¹ At the same time, however, drawing from fellow futurist James Dator's fourfold typology of alternative futures, Voros leaves open the possibility of Threshold 9 involving an eventual transition to a planetary 'transformational society', visions of which tend to emphasize either technological breakthroughs or the actualization of spiritual potentials (the other three possible futures are: continued growth, collapse, and disciplined society).¹² In the latter case, 'some new form or aspect of human consciousness emerges and redefines our value systems, such that we become focused on "higher" goals than we currently pursue'. It might be argued, he continues, 'that Cosmic Evolution, Big History and other related conceptual frameworks may themselves provide a foundation for a new more integrated worldview, onto which an almost spiritual dimension could

10 Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009) p. 112.

11 James Voros, 'Profiling "Threshold 9": Using Big History as a Framework for Thinking about the Contours of the Coming Global Future', in *Evolution: Development within Big History, Evolutionary and World-System Paradigms*, ed. by Leonid E. Grinin and Andrey V. Korotayev (Volgograd: Uchitel Publishing House, 2013), pp. 119–42, at p. 119.

12 See C. Bezold, 'Jim Dator's Alternative Futures and the Path to IAF's Aspirational Futures', *Journal of Futures Studies*, 14.2 (2009), 123–34.

be read'.¹³ Clearly what I am proposing in terms of the emergence of a new Gaian or Gaianthropic identity qualifies as such a new, radical transformation of consciousness.

Returning to the theme of initiation that I opened with, we can note that an essential component during the liminal ('threshold') phase of many rites of initiation involves introducing the initiate to the sacred stories, myths, and symbols of the community into which they are being inducted. In contrast to the situation in both archaic or Indigenous societies and in first Axial traditions, the stories and symbols required for this collective initiation into a new Gaian identity need to include a genuinely common narrative core, regardless of language and ethnicity. The only candidate in this case is the Universe story itself, the major lines, phases, and thresholds of which are, for the first time in the history of our species, well understood and universally acknowledged by the many scientific communities devoted to their study. This is not to say that there is no longer a place for the stories, myths, rituals, and doctrines of the world religions and of Indigenous cultures. On the contrary, these should continue to provide inspiration for reflection on the mysteries of the cosmos, of human nature, and the question of spiritual ultimates, including indications of how we might best navigate the critical planetary threshold on which we are so precariously poised. It is precisely to this end that so much fine work is now being done in the field of religion and ecology.¹⁴

Of course, we cannot know, or at least we cannot expect to arrive at a general consensus as to whether or not one or the other of the world's religious traditions might actually have a direct line to the Universal (or Universals) intuited during the first Axial Age. We can and must, however, acknowledge the sacred character of Gaia as concrete universal. The story of Gaia is sacred because it tells of our common origin and will include our shared destiny. We can therefore envision the open spaces of this living Earth, in and through whom we literally have our being, as the Common Temple of the Second Axial Age, with the sacred places explored by the world's religious traditions as so many side temples with their own unique paths leading to the great Mystery.

13 Voros, 'Profiling "Threshold 9"'.

14 John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014).

It is possible that a new, third kind or species of religion might emerge from our gathering in the sacred precincts of this Common Temple. As Edgar Morin puts it, this would be religion 'in the minimal sense' of the term (suggested in one derivation of the word: from *re-ligare*: to join back together), at the heart of which would be the fact and ideal of planetary 're-liance'.¹⁵ While the first kind of religion arose out the first Axial Age, and the second kind in the Modern period with its faith in this-worldly salvation (the myth of Reason, of progress, and 'development'), the new religion, by contrast,

would not have promises but roots: roots in our cultures and civilizations, in planetary and human history; roots in life; roots in the stars that have forged the atoms of which we are made; roots in the cosmos where the particles were born and out of which our atoms were made [...] Such a religion would involve belief, like all religions but, unlike other religions that repress doubt through excessive zeal, it would make room for doubt within itself. It would look out onto the abyss.¹⁶

The Earth community is being dragged to the edge of this abyss. Faced with the prospect of ever more probable civilizational collapse and an accelerating mass extinction, the human members of this community must learn to think, feel, and act out of their wider and deeper identity as Gaia. There is no guarantee that we will avert planetary catastrophe. There never has been such a guarantee. We can, however, still accomplish the task that has been the secret preoccupation of the 2,500-year Axial Aeon, if not of the 4.6-billion-year journey of Earth's evolution. In the meantime, in the words of the poet,

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.¹⁷

15 Edgar Morin, with Brigitte Kerne, *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium* (New York, NY: Hampton Press, 1999), p. 141.

16 Ibid., p. 142.

17 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*, trans. by Anita Barrows and Joana Macy (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1996), I, 59.

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