

The Martians are coming!
By Michel Clasquin

We will go to Mars. It may not happen soon, and it may not come about as a result of President Bush's recent directive to NASA. But sooner or later we will go. The whole of the emerging global culture points to it.

There was a time, long ago, when there were many different human cultures on Earth. From the American Northwest, where one's status depended on how many of your possessions you were able to give away, to the African Savannah, where the deciding factor was the possession of cattle and the killing of lions, there was an amazing diversity to human life. Thousands of distinct languages were spoken, thousands of religions were practised. Societies were small, typically between twenty and two hundred people

This started to change between two and three thousand years ago, in the period that turned out to be so pivotal to history that the philosopher Karl Jaspers called it the Axial Age, that is, the axis around which history turns. At that stage, there were already major civilisations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and elsewhere, but they were mainly conglomerations of smaller units. What we call Sumeria was really a collection of independent city-states (village-states, really, by our present standards). Local languages largely survived, and local beliefs were not only tolerated, but incorporated rather unsystematically into state cults.

All this changed during the Axial Age. Egypt was probably the earliest to show the way to the future: a single system of writing cemented the supremacy of the language that became known as Egyptian, and the worship of Amon-Ra slowly pushed other cults, survivors from an earlier age of village religions, into the background. Things moved slowly back then, but from our present vantage point we can see how over the next thousand years, the same pattern repeated itself again and again in India, in China and in Europe. One local dialect gained supremacy and became a national language. One religion became a widespread ideology. Slightly later, the same pattern of events even took place in the Americas, in the civilisations of the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas.

The logic of the Axial Age continues unabated to the present day. In fact, it has accelerated. Linguists warn that local languages are dying out almost as fast as species of animals in the rain forests. In South Africa, for example, the Nama language will probably not see the twenty-second century and Griqua, while currently enjoying a brief spell as a "local is lekker" curiosity, is on the endangered list. Religions have followed the pattern faster than languages. A half dozen religions dominate the thinking of the vast majority of our six billion fellow humans, and almost all of them (eg Buddhism, Christianity) can be dated to the Axial Age. The only one that came a little later was Islam, and even that religion acknowledges its roots in the Axial Age development of Judaic and Christian thought.

It is by now almost impossible for us not to think in terms of Axial Age logic. It crops up in the most unlikely places. In the computer world, the buzzword is "interoperability". It seems right and proper, without any further reflection, that all computers in the world should be able to talk to each other. It seems perfectly natural that any telephone user should be able to call any other

telephone in the entire world. Any restriction on this (like DVDs that divide the world into a number of incompatible zones) is experienced as an inconvenience. We don't need to think about this, we don't need to argue the point. It just seems obvious. One language, one religion, one operating system. That is the logic of the Axial Age.

But in fact, this logic has been around for little more than three thousand years, and only in the last three hundred has it really gone global. For well over ninety percent of its existence, homo sapiens lived in small isolated bands, and the notion of a universal language, or a universal religion, would have been utterly incomprehensible. As it remains incomprehensible in those pockets where local languages and religions survive (for now). The ideology of one-ness is a very recent heresy in human development, and just because we all share it does not mean that it is necessarily right.

What do I mean, "we all share it"? Surely not? Oh yes. Even while I am questioning this philosophy, I am doing it in English because I think that that will allow the largest number of people to read it. I constantly try to keep the "average reader" in mind to make sure it will be understood. And I will send it to the editor of Namaste in RTF format because I know that her computer is likely to interpret that properly. Even criticism of the Axial Age and its consequences is deeply embedded within the structures of Axial Age thinking itself. It has become a prison of the mind. A very modern, progressive prison, sure. But still a prison. A few hardy "postmodernists" claim to have escaped from this prison. But from time to time they have to break back in for supplies.

The twentieth century saw the ultimate logical consequence (so far) of the Axial Age: a single global culture. I am not talking about Disneyland in Paris or Coka-Cola advertisements in Addis Ababa. Those are mere symptoms, not the main thing. It is a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world. In this global culture, whether you are a Christian in Alabama, a Buddhist in Japan or a Hindu in Madhya Pradesh actually makes very little difference. Not merely do we watch the same TV shows, or different shows with essentially the same plot, but we expect to see the same kind of thing when we switch the TV on. Free-market democracy, consumer society, modernism, call it what you like. The overall pattern is a steady growth towards one-ness, same-ness.

Talking about TV, watch the news tonight. It doesn't matter which channel. Does it tell you the day's movements on the New York Stock Exchange? It is probably safe to say that 99% of South Africans don't own any American stocks, so why do we need to know this? Because New York is the financial centre of the global culture, just as Paris is the fashion centre and Washington the political centre. Whatever happens in these centres reverberates around the world. If, in the future, that financial centre moves to China, we will be getting the results of the Shanghai Stock Exchange on South African TV. But that would be a mere detail. The system endures.

During the twentieth century, communism promised an alternative vision. But that was a sham. Marx's thinking was solidly based on the philosophy of Hegel, which built on that of Kant, and so on all the way back to Plato. Communism was merely a minor variation of the emerging global society and its philosophy. It too was solidly grounded in the logic of the Axial Age, indeed, it was even more overtly so than capitalism. After all, Marx predicted that just one class would remain standing after the revolution. Lenin introduced absolute rule by one party. Again,

we see the move to one-ness.

Few "revolutions" and "paradigm shifts" are really radical, and those in recent memory have been less radical than most. Feminism? It insists that there are not two unequal kinds of human being, male and female, but just one. They are right, of course. But this argument is a logical extension of the earlier battle over the assertion that there were not two unequal kinds of people, serfs and aristocrats, but just one. Environmentalism? Now that one once looked promising: after all, what is environmentalism if not a philosophy that promotes diversity? But much of contemporary environmentalism has become locked into a static view of nature, of preserving nature in an idealised form that excludes humanity. It has become yet another form of one-ness philosophy. "Become one with nature". Well, what else can you be?

The global society is not simplistically "western". One can call it that for reasons of (fairly recent) history, but the Axial Age logic that underlies it is as much Chinese and Indian as it is European. Once contact was made, the Axial Age cultures rapidly started to merge. India, Japan and China may have been "westernised", but Europe and America have equally much been "orientalised". Minimalist architecture and design echo the austerity of Zen temples. Japanese swords and swordsmanship feature in films and cartoons rather than European sabres and rapiers. Even modern-day cowboys (like the character played by Chuck Norris in the long-running TV series "Walker, Texas Ranger") are expected to know their karate moves. Western culture is a local outcrop of global culture and it is already hard to tell where it ends and other outcrops start.

And so, the global society with its Axial Age logic has become the overarching ideology, the uber-religion, under which we all live. As religions go, it is tolerant of what came before. By and large, it allows remnants of the earlier religions to go on, as long as they remain private and subjective matters, not to be discussed in polite society. One by one, the older religions have succumbed and accepted this reduced place in the greater scheme of things. Islam (at least some forms of it) is the last hold-out, and its resistance to assimilation is being played out in the Middle East as we speak.

There is one aspect of this uber-religion that concerns us greatly here. It carries the unquestioned assumption of the value of expansion. In the film "Wall Street", the Gordon Gekko character famously declares that "greed is good". He was too modest in his assessment. The greater truth, in Axial Age logic, is that "growth is good". Religions must compete for adherents - whether they are up-front or subtle about it, the unquestioned assumption is that that things would be better if everybody else adopted my religion. Kingdoms must expand their territory. Languages must increase their number of native speakers. And this logic remains with us today. Again, watch the TV news and read the newspapers. The need for economic growth is an unquestioned good. If only we can grow the economy, we will all have a little more. On a smaller scale, companies compete for market-share. political parties for voters, universities for students. There are bragging rights and practical benefits involved in being able to say that "my department is the biggest on campus", or "we are the most-watched TV station in South Africa". Growth is good. Expansion is a necessity.

But this is not the only way to run a society. Even a little study of anthropology reveals that there have been societies that have valued stability over growth. There have been societies, notably the

potlatch economies of the American Northwest, that valued distribution rather than growth. One could argue that these have been spectacularly unsuccessful societies. They did not grow, they shrank and disappeared. But to make that argument is to argue from within the very Axial Age philosophy to which these societies pose an alternative! Our minds remain imprisoned.

And all of this brings us to why we will go to Mars. If expansion is a central goal of society, that implies that there is a frontier, beyond which there is a wasteland into which we can expand. The Axial Age's relentless drive towards one-ness requires a two-ness, an Other that we can gradually turn into our One.

But what happens when there is no more unoccupied land, no more heathens to convert, no more savages to turn into placid consumers? What happens when there is a single culture everywhere, when there is one company with 100 percent market share, one university, one universal religion? What happens when there is no more frontier, and no more wasteland? Where does our global society grow to then?

We're not quite there yet. But things certainly seem to be moving in that direction. New religions spring up all the time, but frankly, they are just local variations on some very old themes. New countries declare themselves independent just as the concept of the nation state is made irrelevant by the greater reality of a shared global culture. Giant corporations merge into mega-companies that could buy small countries with little more than the advertising budget. Even when entities remain formally separated, they are linked into virtual organisations by layer upon layer of networks. Eventually the only way out will be to go up.

And that is why we will go to Mars. Not because of scientific research, not because of immediate economic benefits, not even because it is a piece of high adventure. Those are pretexts. We will go because three thousand years of cultural pressure to grow, to expand, will become an irresistible force. I doubt I'll live to see it. But it will happen.

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