



## Context and Meaning of the Axial Age Concept Comparing the Formulations of John Stuart-Glennie and Karl Jaspers

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**Abstract:** John Stuart-Glennie's concept of the Moral Revolution of the sixth century BCE is compared with Karl Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age lasting from 800 to 200 BCE. I praise Eugene Halton's revival of Stuart-Glennie's work, but hold Jaspers' treatment, built on the scholarship of Max Weber, to be the rightful source of much contemporary research on the development of world civilizations. Like Weber, Jaspers underscored differences among the developmental paths of the great civilizations of China, India, Classical Antiquity, Islam, and the Modern West; Stuart-Glennie treated them as basically being similar, deriving from a Moral Revolution that was fundamentally alike across civilizations.

**Keywords:** Stuart-Glennie, John S.; Jaspers, Karl; Weber, Max; Axial Age; moral revolution; modern West; civilization.

"Today the attitude to history that knows it as an overseeable whole is being surmounted. No exclusive total outline of history is still capable of satisfying us. We do not obtain a final, but only a currently possible, integument for the totality of history, which breaks up again."<sup>1</sup> With this statement about modern understandings of history, Karl Jaspers established a frame for his own contributions to the philosophy of history, one sharply distinct from the frame that we find in John Stuart-Glennie's philosophy of history. Eugene Halton's argument that Stuart-Glennie's conception of "Moral Revolution" antedates Karl Jaspers' conception of "Axial Age" by some 75 years is an important contribution to the growing literature on the Axial Age.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of the forerunners of conceptions

fundamental to contemporary understanding of world religions and major, enduring civilizations is intrinsically important to scholarship. Halton's account enriches our perspective on the historical and theoretical complexities of the ways in which the religio-philosophical breakthroughs of the Axial Age have been identified, conceptualized, critiqued, and valued. Yet, by examining differences between Jaspers' and Stuart-Glennie's perspectives, we may also deepen our understanding of why Jaspers' conception has been the greater stimulant to a growing scholarship in recent decades than the one by Stuart-Glennie.<sup>3</sup>

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*Revolution: John Stuart-Glennie, Karl Jaspers, and a New Understanding of the Idea*, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. [Henceforth cited as AMR]

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, p. 267. [Henceforth cited as OGH]

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Halton, *From the Axial Age to the Moral*

<sup>3</sup> Besides AMR I have in mind such works as *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1986, with twenty-two different contributors; *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, eds. Robert N.

Let me begin by placing the concepts of Moral Revolution and Axial Age against the intellectual backgrounds of Stuart-Glennie's and Jaspers' respective works.

Stuart-Glennie begins the first volume of his *Proœmia* by reviewing philosophies of history.<sup>4</sup> He demonstrates that an understanding or interpretation of history is fundamental to Christianity. Belief in the fall of man, in Jesus as the turning point of all human existence, and in the anticipation of a time of final judgment and possible redemption is essential to Christianity (*IO* 10-5). He then argues that the falsity of the Christian philosophy of history has been made clear through the development of a New Philosophy of History by figures from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. He emphasizes in particular David Hume and Immanuel Kant as consolidating a first phase and then Georg W. F. Hegel and Auguste Comte as foundational to a second phase of the New Philosophy. Hegel and Comte provide universal understandings, but differ on the issue of causation; one is emphasizing idealism, the other materialism (*IO* 10-5).<sup>5</sup> What is needed, then, is a more general law of causation that overcomes the differences between idealism and materialism, and also subjectivism and objectivism, in order to create an Ultimate Law of History, which will also serve as a Religion of the Future.<sup>6</sup>

Yet how Stuart-Glennie understands a Religion of the Future is somewhat unclear, as in many other passages he identifies himself as a positivist and a skeptic about the doctrines of all of the religions of his time. In promising an Ultimate Law, Stuart-Glennie

claims, consistent with Comtean positivism, to envision a law in a sense parallel to Newton's laws, which he understood as the underlying and unchanging basis of all science (*IO* 63).<sup>7</sup> Yet, he also sees the Ultimate Law as a moral reality, a guide to life and conduct that will succeed Christianity and all other historical religions (*IO* 60-1), and he ponders if it "will enable us rightly, at length, to interpret the Past, and truly to prophesy the Future?" Thus, his understanding of an Ultimate Law of History was to be an updated, empirically validated version of Comtean positivism, enriched by references to Darwin and Spencer. It was to be integral to modern science, which Stuart-Glennie viewed as the essential determinant of modern life. Stuart-Glennie understood that this vision of a science of the human future was not to be fully realized in his lifetime, but his projection of the Ultimate Law predicted that it would be fully realized by the end of the twentieth century.

In order to clarify the basis of this Ultimate Law, Stuart-Glennie reviewed the conceptions of causation in the various sciences, from physics through chemistry and biology, as well as the study of the human mind. An elaborate classification of sciences and their foundations in ideas of aspects of reality was the result (*IO* 126),<sup>8</sup> but Newtonian mechanics, with its basis in a conception of constant and universal laws, remained the basis of all science. Stuart-Glennie concluded his overview of positive science by reemphasizing the need for an integration of idealistic and materialistic understandings of human thought and historical development, matters he treated as intimately connected. The Ultimate Philosophy of History is thus to be founded on a conception of mutual determination of idealistic and material factors, and of causation and change, a formulation Stuart-Glennie repeated many times, but actually did little to explain it (*IO* 147-243).

On this basis of an Ultimate Law, Stuart-Glennie posited three stages of humanity. First were the early human societies and civilizations up to 600 BCE or so. Second followed the civilizations shaped by the Moral Revolution of the sixth century BCE. He considered this revolution to be basically the same, whether occurring in China, India, Iran, Judea, or Greece.

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Bellah and Hans Joas, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 2012, with seventeen contributors, only one author overlapping with the Eisenstadt volume; and most importantly, Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> John S. Stuart-Glennie, *The Modern Revolution; Proœmia 1; Isis and Osiris; Or the Origin of Christianity as a Verification of an Ultimate Law of History*, London, UK: Longmans, Green & Co., 1878. Hathi Trust access <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005263788>. [Henceforth cited as *IO*]

<sup>5</sup> See also the discussion of a range of Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophies of history (*IO* 40-62).

<sup>6</sup> See especially *IO* 61-2, 63 for a summary that initiates the next subsection.

<sup>7</sup> This point is restated at many passages in all three volumes of *Proœmia*.

<sup>8</sup> At this passage Stuart-Glennie presents a table and summarizes a previous discussion of the various sciences and the relations among them.

As he says of the polities resulting from the Moral Revolution, they were "one great movement common both to the East and the West...like their Philosophies and Religions, treated as correlative developments."<sup>9</sup> However, he gave particular attention to the emergence of Christianity and specific phases of its evolution, but no comparably detailed attention to later developments in China, India, or Iran. He emphasized that in each of the civilizations the sixth century BCE had brought what he considered to be a Protestant revolution consisting of a philosophical attack on myth and idolatry.<sup>10</sup> It appears that, despite his perspicacity in recognizing something in common among different civilizations, he did not in fact know much either about the philosophic-ethical content of the Moral Revolution as it emerged in the non-Western civilizations or about cultural and institutional developments in these civilizations that occurred in the centuries after the Moral Revolution. In *Book II of Europe and Asia*, "Through Turkish Illyria," Stuart-Glennie frequently compares the morality and justice of the Islamic Turkish domains of Illyria (the Balkans) very favorably to the Austrian and Christian domains; matters he treats as differences in degrees of living up to the principles of an apparently similar Moral Revolution (EA 183-398).

Stuart-Glennie also divided in interesting ways civilizations based on the Moral Revolution into roughly 500-year periods, but his analysis focused almost entirely on Western civilization. The third phase of history and civilization was based on the new philosophy and science that had been emerging since the sixteenth century and was to be fully realized in the twentieth century. His account of the emerging new civilization is similarly Western-focused, but, anticipating current globalism, he underscored in the nineteenth century something that is now widely

accepted, namely, the universal implications of Western science and technology. However, in contrast to Max Weber and his successors who have emphasized the universal implications of Western modernity, he made no comparable claims for such institutions as Western rational law, formal means of administration, democratic types of political organization, forms of civil society, institutions of banking and finance, or market economies.

Jaspers' conception of the Axial Age, although formulated in a later phase of his career, shows a marked influence of Max Weber, who was an important figure in his intellectual development early in his career.<sup>11</sup> Aspects of the framing of the conception of the Axial Age follow elements of Weber's methodology, which Jaspers had praised in a famous essay.<sup>12</sup> The idea of the Axial Age was also based on substantial knowledge of Asian as well as European religions and civilizations. A biographer tells us that he had started to study Indian and Chinese philosophy as early as 1938 at the suggestion of the accomplished Heidelberg scholar of Indian philosophy and arts, Heinrich Zimmer (KJ 173-4, 182, 210-1). Jaspers provided few scholarly notes to *The Origin and Goal of History*, but the sections on Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus of *The Great Philosophers* show that he was well immersed in twentieth century scholarship on these great figures.<sup>13</sup> He clearly had some familiarity with scholarship on the civilizations that gave rise to their unique lives as well as the civilizations shaped by the religious ethics for which their teachings, as elaborated and systematized by followers, provided essential stimuli. It is reasonable to believe that that he was familiar with Weber's comparative studies of Ancient Israel, China, and India, as well as Weber's early writings on classical antiquity, although he does not cite any of these works. Jaspers' understanding of the Axial Age thus built upon scholarship with depths of analysis, extent of empirical

<sup>9</sup> John S. Stuart-Glennie, *The Modern Revolution; Proemium; Pilgrim Memories or Travel and Discussion in the Birth-Countries of Christianity With the Late Henry Thomas Buckle*, London, UK: Longmans, Green & Co. 1876, p. liii. British Library access [http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc\\_000000036630](http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_000000036630). [Henceforth cited as PM]

<sup>10</sup> John S. Stuart-Glennie, *The Modern Revolution; Proemia III; Europe and Asia; Discussions of the Eastern Question in Travels through Independent, Turkish, and Austrian Illyria*, London, UK: Chapman and Hall 1879, pp. 268-9, 360-1. Hathi Trust access <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89073390940>. [Henceforth cited as EA]

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Suzanne Kirkbight, *Karl Jaspers, A Biography: Navigations in Truth*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2004, especially Chapter 7. [Henceforth cited as KJ]

<sup>12</sup> Karl Jaspers, "Max Weber," in *Three Essays: Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World 1964, pp. 187-274.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962. [Henceforth cited as GP]

illustration, and methodical substantiation unavailable to Stuart-Glennie, although, to be sure, Stuart-Glennie was well read in the more limited scholarship of his own time.

One indication of the difference in their scholarly knowledge is that Jaspers dated the Axial Age as the epoch from 800 to 200 BCE, while Stuart-Glennie indicated the sixth century BCE specifically as the time of the Moral Revolution. In *The Great Philosophers*, Jaspers also noted that Jesus and Mohammad lived centuries after the Axial Age and yet were the paradigmatic figures around whose lives and teachings two of the great world religions have synthesized elements of religio-philosophic culture developed in the Axial Age. In his discussions of Jesus and Mohammad, Jaspers in effect further relativized the conception of the Axial Age as a fount of the world civilizations that have been sustained down to our own time (GP 97-111).

Of greatest importance, I believe, was Weber's demonstration in his studies in the sociology of religion that the great civilizations we, following Jaspers, call Axial actually differed profoundly from one another in the patterning of their religious ethics and their philosophies. Weber emphasized that the religious ethics of their respective charismatic figures, Confucius, the authors of the Upanishads, Buddha, the Greek philosophers, the Hebrew prophets, and later, Jesus and Mohammad, were radically different, so that civilizations based on their, and their followers', teachings necessarily progressed along divergent paths. As a consequence, the civilizations based on the various Axial or world religions have differed from one another in their basic social institutions—rituals, law, social stratification, political organization, and modes of economic production and exchange or circulation. Jaspers affirmed this point in stating of the Axial civilizations: "The lines of subsequent development do not run parallel, but rather diverge" (OGH 12).

A review of Jaspers' conception of the Axial Age shows that he begins by noting that Hegel's conception of Jesus as being the axis of world history could be valid only for Christians, hence cannot embody a universal truth (OGH 1). He then suggests that empirically an axis of history valid for all humankind can be found around 500 BCE, certainly between 800 and 200 BCE. He notes that Confucius and Lao-Tse in China, Buddha in India, Zarathustra in Iran, the later Hebrew prophets, and key Greek philosophers created parallel experiences of "absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence" (OGH

2). These new religious or philosophic understandings led to profound discomfort in, even terror of, worldly arrangements, with a new awareness of human limitations, radical questioning of institutions, and efforts to obtain redemption or salvation (GP 97-106).

In introducing the section on Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus in *The Great Philosophers*, Jaspers calls them "the Paradigmatic individuals." The conclusion to this section shows that these key axial figures were not themselves philosophers, but paradigmatic in the sense that they established essential conceptual and ethical terms. On the one hand, these terms were derived from, but changed and revitalized, the traditions of the civilizations in which they lived. On the other hand, they defined key problems for the subsequent development of schools of philosophy (GP 104-6). The paradigmatic thinkers did not themselves publish (well, he says "write"), so how could they be philosophers? But their followers, over thousands of years, did write and publish, whereby the interpretation of the paradigmatic lives and thought provided many basic themes for their works.

The paradigmatic status of the axial figures, their unique life experiences, and their modes of thought established profound dividing lines between the civilizations that preceded them and the deeply altered civilizations that came after them. As Jaspers emphasizes, "The Axial Period does not represent a universal stage in human evolution, but a singular ramified historical process" (GP 17). It is not a stage, but a process—and one that was ramified, that is, carried out on different paths in the various civilizations. From the Axial Age, the civilizations diverged, each one from the others, each one following a distinctive course of cultural and institutional development. The differences among Chinese, Indian, and Western works of visual art and music are clear indices of the civilizational divergences.

Regarding each of the paradigmatic figures Jaspers stresses that one cannot know the actualities of their lives because they have been so covered over in the mythologies created by their followers that modern historical scholarship cannot unearth their realities (GP 74, 97). He emphasizes this point especially with regard to Jesus. Interestingly, Stuart-Glennie made the same point:

from narratives so meagre as that of Matthew, so fragmentary as that of Mark, so mythological as that of Luke, so mystical as that of John, so late and unsupported by external evidence as them all, it was now probably

impossible truly to reconstruct the life of Jesus. [PM 392]

For Jaspers, the task was to evaluate the importance of the teachings of the paradigmatic figures, in full knowledge that their lives had been mythologized and their ethics reformulated by later theologians and philosophers. In terms of his own philosophy, Jaspers was interested in the respects in which the "historicity and consequent uniqueness [of the paradigmatic figures] can be perceived only within the all-embracing historicity of humanity, which in each of them expresses itself in a wholly different way" (GP 13).

What I wish to underscore is that Jaspers' conception of the independent, diverging Axial processes is fundamentally different from Stuart-Glennie's conception of the Moral Revolution as a universal stage of human history. The former highlights differences, albeit parallelisms, among the Axial figures and the followers who promulgated systematic statements of their teachings. Accordingly, it underscores divergences, not underlying uniformity or, as Stuart-Glennie says repeatedly, correlation among the resulting civilizations (PM viii). Like Stuart-Glennie, Jaspers attended to the respects in which subsequent philosophies derived from the paradigmatic Axial breakthroughs, but in the *Origin and Goal of History* and other works he, like Weber, underscored differences among civilizations, rather than assuming a convergent Moral Revolution.

Jaspers believed that a new revolution was emerging in his time through the universal significance of modern science and technology. There is clear convergence between Jaspers and Stuart-Glennie in that both saw twentieth century developments as central to a new socio-cultural reality. Jaspers, however, was likely echoing Max Weber's well-known emphasis on the universal import of a number of institutional developments in the modern West, including inner-worldly ascetic outlooks, extended markets, bureaucracy, higher education, and changes in social classes, but centrally science, technology, and secular rationality.<sup>14</sup> But Jaspers was not positing

a fated and certain crystallization of a final stage of human development in the manner of Stuart-Glennie's positivistic Ultimate Law of History.

In treating the emergent third era of human history, Stuart-Glennie focuses on its allegedly mechanico-centric mind, and to a degree Halton follows him in doing so. Their discussions then focus sharply on the scientific and technological frameworks of Western civilization. I believe that they understate the importance of other dimensions of contemporary culture—religious, moral or ethical, and artistic—as well as the many social institutions that sustain the various dimensions of modern social life.

Continuing with an emphasis on science and technology, however, Halton's concluding chapters, entitled "The Next Transformation?" and "The Moral Revolution and the Modern Revolution Today," present a penetrating analysis of the wide range of current social and ecological problems that have resulted from the institutional accommodations that contemporary societies have made to science, technology, and technologic productivity in the economy, especially the practices that have been affecting climate. I believe there is some irony in Stuart-Glennie's optimistic Ultimate Philosophy of History having led Halton, through emphasis on the mechano-centric mind, that is, scientific and technological mind, to such a pessimistic, although highly realistic, understanding of our contemporary situation, which is, indeed, global.

In sum, I believe that Halton's argument about the respects in which Stuart-Glennie anticipated Jaspers' idea of the Axial Age requires important qualification. Yet, his extension of Stuart-Glennie's positivistic understanding of the modern age with its reliance on science and technology frames a very important discussion of the moral dilemmas we face today with the long-run consequences of our energy-intensive, petroleum-centered technologies for climate change. Halton essays the need for a contemporary moral and institutional revolution to preserve humanity from the results of its own innovations. His argument that the core of humanity's difficulties is essentially moral—and that a moral revolution is needed—is creatively and forcefully developed. The ways in which the current administration under President Trump has swiftly undercut the carefully initiated planning of the Obama-era administration to limit climate change is clear evidence of the essentially moral character of our problem.

I hope that the foregoing remarks will not be

<sup>14</sup> Compare Max Weber, "Author's Introduction," in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. Talcott Parsons, New York, NY: Scribner's 1930, pp. 13-31. Note that this essay was originally published as the "Vorbemerkung" of the whole of Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, 3 Vols., Tübingen, DE: J. C. B. Mohr 1920-1923, but was placed at the head of the translation of its first section by the translator.

perceived as overly critical of Halton's important contribution to our understanding of the Axial Age and its consequences down to our own times. My intent has simply been to qualify his argument about Stuart-Glennie's priority in identifying the Axial Age. My critical comparison of the conceptions of Moral

Revolution and Axial Age has sought to justify the efforts, cited above, of Eisenstadt, Bellah, and many others to build contemporary comparative scholarship on the major civilizations of the world on the foundation of Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age, which I hope I have shown to be the richer conception.