



John Stuart Stuart-Glennie versus Karl Jaspers A Quixotic Quest?

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Abstract: Theories of an Axial Age (800-200 BCE) in which humanity, moral consciousness, ethics and religious sensibility came into existence have been connected to Karl Jaspers as the principal originator of them. Such theories claim that nothing new has been added to human culture since that *Achsenzeit*. This academic wisdom has been challenged by Eugene Halton who shows convincingly if repetitiously that the idea of an Axial Age was developed by John Stuart Stuart-Glennie some seventy-five years before Jaspers under the heading of the Moral Revolution. Halton also claims that similar ideas were put forward by Lewis Mumford and D. H. Lawrence. As an academic detective story, Halton's book is successful, but what is the intellectual reward of such an exercise? One answer is that the focus on nature and technology in both Stuart-Glennie and Mumford provides the basis for an inquiry into a new technological transformation that is post-axial. Such an inquiry is found in Halton's concluding chapter on "The Moral Revolution and the Modern Revolution Today." Halton argues that Stuart-Glennie has been neglected for his theories were too complicated and he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Stuart-Glennie, John S.; Axial Age; core and peripheral civilizations; Moral Revolution; technology.

In the last three to four decades, the analysis of the Axial Age has enjoyed a remarkable revival. Karl Jaspers' *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* was published in 1949 and then translated into English as the *Origin and Goal of History* in 1953.¹ Jaspers argued that between 800 and 200 BCE there emerged a range of significant belief systems namely Confucius and Lao-tse in China, the Buddha in Asia, the philosophers of Ancient Greece, the Hebrew prophets and Zoroaster in Persia. The simultaneous emergence of these belief systems represents a revolution in human consciousness.

These religio-philosophical systems were based on the conviction that human life is unsatisfactory; the idea that transcendence gives life a new meaning, and that there is another world by which this world can be critically judged. Arnaldo Momigliano called it "the age of criticism."² Perhaps the most remarkable and controversial conclusion of Jaspers' study of the Axial Age is: "Man, as we know him today, came into being" during this period (*OGH* 1). While Jaspers is normally credited with inventing the idea of the *Achsenzeit* or the historical turning point, Alfred Weber had identified the

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

² Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom. The Limits of Hellenization*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1975, pp. 9-10.

synchronicity of the emergence of universally oriented religious and philosophical systems from the ninth to the sixth century BCE lasting until the sixteenth century after which there was nothing new in either religion or philosophy. However, in his comparative sociology, Max Weber had also recognized the significance of the Hebrew prophets and the contributions of the Asian religions in his comparative sociology.³

The idea of an Axial Age probably gained traction in more recent sociology through publications by Shmuel Eisenstadt, however the contemporary vitality of the theory rests on the writings by Robert Bellah and Hans Joas. Like Jaspers and Weber, Bellah's evolutionary view of religion suggests that nothing new was added by Christianity and Islam that has not already been present in the Axial Age religions.⁴

This is, so to speak, the settled account of the origins axial age debate. Obviously there have been criticisms of the idea. For example, John Boy and John Torpey argue that Jaspers completely ignored the global South and ruled out any possibility of significant spiritual or cultural development after this period.⁵ For example with Jesus or the Prophet Mohammed there were no second-wave turning points with the axial-age foundations.

However, what I refer to as "the settled account" has been challenged by Eugene Halton in various publications, especially in *From the Axial Age to the Moral Revolution*.⁶ Halton's main contention is that the Scottish folklorist John Stuart Stuart-Glennie—a folklorist from Scotland who presented his ideas to a sociological audience—had identified the Axial Age as the "Moral Revolution of the sixth century B.C." some seventy-five years before Jaspers' theory.⁷ Halton also

draws attention to the works of Lewis Mumford and D. H. Lawrence, both of which had identified axial age transformations in the long history of humanity.

Halton sets out several reasons for the reconsideration of Stuart-Glennie's work. First, he should be given due credit for his fully developed theory long before Jaspers. Secondly, his notion of a Moral Revolution gives a better description of the period than "Axial" does. Thirdly, Stuart-Glennie's understanding of the period provides a better grasp of its context.

Stuart-Glennie was certainly an active and energetic man with an encyclopedic mind. He was a prolific writer. Halton draws our attention to several of his outstanding works. Besides his contributions to the study of folklore, Stuart-Glennie also belonged to an influential circle of intellectuals around the London School of Economics, which included Patrick Geddes, Victor Branford, L. T. Hobhouse, and Francis Galton. As a socialist, he was also associated with the Fabian Society, a centralist version of socialism founded in 1884. How then might we explain the neglect of his work? Halton's answer correctly proposes that "some combination of the complexity and originality of his ideas, plus the facts that he was not affiliated with a university and left no students played a role" in his neglect (AMR 11).

Stuart-Glennie called the period the "Moral Revolution" as the religions that emerged in and from that period were religions of conscience rather than of custom. He also adopted the idea articulated by Momigliano that criticism (of empirical reality) emerged in this period. This was a time marked by "the first beginnings of general reflection on the Past, and speculation on the Future of Mankind; the first beginnings, therefore, of Universal, and Philosophical History."⁸ Ideas of brotherly love and equality began to appear in philosophical systems that were distinct from religious ideas. A critical feature of this revolution was therefore the spread of literacy allowing for the storage and tradition of these ideas. Alongside these cultural

& Co.Ltd., pp. 243-304, here p. 267. Hathi Trust access <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3136623>.

⁸ John Stuart Stuart-Glennie, *The Modern Revolution; Introductory Historical Analysis; In the Morningland, or, The Law of the Origin and Transformation of Christianity, Volume 1: The New Philosophy of History, and The Origin of the Doctrines of Christianity*, London, UK: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1873, pp. 213-4. Hathi Trust access <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnvxzu>. [Henceforth cited as ML]

³ Bryan S. Turner, "Max Weber and the Sociology of Religion," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 276/2 (2016), pp.141-150.

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁵ John D. Boy and John Torpey, "Inventing the Axial Age: The Origins and Uses of a Historical Concept," *Theory and Society* 42/3 (May 2013), 241-259.

⁶ Eugene Halton, *From the Axial Age to the Moral Revolution: John Stuart-Glennie, Karl Jaspers, and a New Understanding of the Idea*, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. [Henceforth cited as AMR]

⁷ John Stuart Stuart-Glennie, "Sociological Studies," in *Sociological Papers*, 1905 Vol. II, London, UK: MacMillan

changes, there was the beginning of urbanization, the building of states and the emergence of empire by Cyrus the Great. Stuart-Glennie also developed distinctive ideas about the nature of religion and its development. He examined theories of causality as marking important transitions in human consciousness that began to separate subjective and objective realms. Halton, in my view correctly, gives Stuart-Glennie credit for spelling out the material and technological changes that made this revolution possible. He paid close attention to the changes in man's relationship to the natural world, both animate and inanimate, that came about through technologies. This material dimension has been largely absent from accounts related to the Axial Age.

Although Halton has undertaken a systematic and detailed presentation of Stuart-Glennie's ideas, he presents only few critical responses to Stuart-Glennie's considerable oeuvre. In fact his main criticism is with regard to Stuart-Glennie's racist view of history and human achievement, but he points to parallel limitations in Jaspers' philosophy where Jaspers rejected the civilizations of Africa and the Americas as contributing anything of significance to human spiritual development: "We see the vast territories of Northern Asia, Africa, and America, which were inhabited by men but saw nothing of importance to the history of the spirit" (*OGH* 22). Jaspers was primarily concerned to reject Georg W. F. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* in which he asserted for example that China had no history and was inescapably stagnating, and that Africans had no understanding of universality being locked into a localized and particular culture. The key issue for Jaspers was the unity of humankind and human history.

My main criticism of Halton is that he somewhat repetitiously tells us that Stuart-Glennie described the Axial Age in great detail seventy-five years before the publication of Jaspers' *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, yet he does not tell us why this fact is intellectually important. It is obviously important to get the historical background correct, but would it really matter if yet another obscure writer had described the axial age one hundred years before Jaspers? I call this a Quixotic Quest, because it does look like attacking windmills. Halton is not accusing Jaspers of plagiarism, but rather that Jaspers simply did not know that Stuart-Glennie, Mumsford and Lawrence had developed similar ideas about the transformative character of this early period of human history. Despite the Quixotic attack, it can be said that Halton has written an important book that

considers the possibility of a next transformation in chapter six. In fact the most important chapter in the book is the conclusion in which he begins to see the real weakness in the Axial Age debate.

With respect to Jaspers, his work concerning the Axial Age can be considered in the context of the fall of Nazi Germany and the collective self-reflection that occupied and continues to occupy German public debate. Jaspers' conception of an Axial Age was developed alongside his concern with war guilt.⁹ Jaspers' aim was not so much to show how the spirit of humanity had flourished in the work of diverse religious figures but rather that humans belong to a single and inclusive history. Humanity is a single story with a common origin. Stuart Glennie, by comparison, never abandoned his racist views, and this fact may explain why it is Jaspers rather than Stuart Glennie that has been associated with a moral revolution of ancient history. Stuart Glennie's views about race, genetics, and nature jar with modern historical sensitivities.

However, there is a problem with Jaspers' account if one tries to reconcile his deep commitment to the idea of the unified and singular history of human beings with his idea of history as a diffusion of ideas from a core (Europe and the Near East) to the periphery (Africa, the Americas, Japan and the Pacific). It is regarding this issue that Halton is perhaps most critical of Jaspers:

The attunement to the wild habitat through the gathering, hunting, ritual, dramatic, play and identifying practices of the sacred game marked a spiritual achievement of the deepest significance in human evolution, feeding body and soul, helping propel us into our symbolizing species. Jaspers's idea that "the history of the spirit" turned upon the axial period is a conceit of anthropocentric mind, encapsulated within an all-too-human world. [*AMR* 69]

One defense of Jaspers is that he was writing in the immediate context of the aftermath of the atrocities of World War II, and was seeking an idea of a shared world as conceived by the great minds of the Axial Age. Another interpretation is offered by Torpey who, following the work of the historian Philip Curtin, notes that the aridity of sub-Saharan Africa blocked the dispersion of axial-age ideas and that the Americas were not known to Europeans until 2,000 years after the axial breakthrough. Thus the inhabitants of the periphery "might not have participated in these developments,

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York, NY: Dial Press, 1947.

but not through any fault of their own, and certainly not as a result of any cultural or intellectual deficiency."¹⁰ Perhaps we cannot ultimately find a convincing defense of Jaspers since he and Stuart-Glennie shared some of the cultural perceptions of their time. Jaspers was blind to the spirituality of aboriginal cultures on the periphery of axial civilizations; Stuart-Glennie could not break free from the ideas of racial superiority of his milieu.

At this juncture I am persuaded that Stuart Glennie perceived the Axial Age theory seventy-five years before Jaspers, yet I still need an answer to my "so what?" question. The answer comes at the end of Halton's book where he attacks axial-age theorists for insisting firstly that nothing new came later in history and secondly that the ethical answers needed for our age cannot be found in the *Achsenzeit*. The nothing-new argument is implausible, and Halton is correct to draw our attention to two issues: the huge technological changes that have radically transformed the era of modernity, and

secondly the material basis of social change: "Jaspers' claim that the axial age will remain central to a further transformation seems doubtful to me, simply because it falsely overvalues one of a series of transformations as key to them all" (AMR 122). Halton makes a powerful claim that the industrialization of agriculture and the growth of biotechnologies have transformed human relationship to nature and to one's own body. These changes have seriously negative consequences for which the ethical assertions of the Axial Age have no answer. Consequently Halton is rightly impressed by Mumford's focus on social change brought about by technology and urbanization. This conclusion concerning major changes in human societies is an important response to the Axial Age debate that was originally concerned with epochal changes to social and cultural context of human existence especially after a world war. Halton thus offers a significant challenge to Robert Bellah's idea regarding an evolution that is prompted by what his critics call the axial "big bang."

¹⁰ John Torpey, "Axial Age," *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory, Vol.1q*, ed. Bryan S. Turner, Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell 2018, pp.107-11, here p. 110.