



The Axial Age and the Quest for a Secular Religion in Modernity

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Abstract: The question of whether the Axial Age can be asserted as historical reality has long been disputed. This essay argues that the Axial Age is best understood as an expression of philosophical faith. The existence of a common axis in the history of humanity can ultimately not be shown by means of empirical evidence. Humans rather must have faith in sharing one common history. Karl Jaspers' understanding of faith follows Immanuel Kant's conception of religion insofar as faith is sustained through a moral commitment to humanity. The essay shows that while Jaspers lays out the moral and faith-based dimensions of the Axial Age, he holds on to the assumption of its historical reality, which leads to tensions within his approach. Especially his Eurocentric premises make it difficult to believe in an axis that would unify all human development.

Keywords: Axial Age; humanity; history; religion; philosophical faith; modernity; secularism; Eurocentrism.

Like the famous reversible figure that can be perceived and interpreted either as rabbit or duck, Karl Jaspers' conception of an Axial Age has a vexing effect.¹ It is unclear whether the conception must be seen primarily in a historical or philosophical way. From a historical perspective, the Axial Age is a sequence of separate but inter-related events, and the task of the historian is to identify the common features of, and the connection between these events by means of empirical evidence. The historian also needs to show in which sense the Axial Age has led to an actual turning point in the development of humankind. From a philosophical perspective, it matters less whether the relations between the events exist empirically. What counts is that different intellectual achievements can be interpreted as sharing similar goals and allowing for

a common understanding of the essence and purpose of humanity. The two perspectives are obviously not mutually exclusive, which distinguishes the Axial Age from reversible figures that can only be perceived as being one or the other. But I believe that it is crucial for the understanding of the idea to know whether its validity is based in concepts or in empirical evidence.

The essay provides a philosophical understanding of the Axial Age and addresses what I believe to be insurmountable problems that prevent one from asserting this age as a historical reality. Jaspers seems to assume that the two ways of understanding it belong together. However, the philosophical approach can be made independent from the historical one, at least independent from a historical approach that would be based on evidence. My interpretation of the conception will be developed by exploring the dimension of philosophical faith. Jaspers uses the concept himself in his work on *The Origin and Goal of*

¹ A version of this essay was presented at the Eighth International Jaspers Conference, Beijing, August 2018.

History.² The idea of a philosophical faith is complex too and invites a number of interpretations, especially in relation to the idea of the Axial Age.³ In order to proceed on steady grounds, I will read Jaspers' conception along with what can be considered one of its precursors, namely Immanuel Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Kant's work can serve as a model to understand both the systematic conditions of philosophical faith and the broader context of the history of ideas in which the assumption of the Axial Age can be situated. Within the history of ideas, the Axial Age can be placed among attempts at finding a secular religion, or a religion with secular roots under the conditions of modernity. Systematically speaking, and following Kant's model, these secular roots lie in morality, or practical reason. I will therefore assume that the foundation of philosophical faith, at least insofar as it relates to the Axial Age, can also be found in moral ideas. Although philosophical faith has many layers in Jaspers' thought, its moral dimension prevails in his attempt at tracing the origin and goal of human history. For example, John Torpey points out that the developments in the Axial Age are not religious "in the narrow sense" but contain articulations of a universalist morality.⁴ Similarly, Karen Armstrong emphasizes the moral dimension of the Axial Age.⁵ Morality is hereby obviously not limited to particular duties and rules but, as Kurt Salamun notes, also represents assumptions about the purpose and orientation of human life as a whole.⁶

² Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953. [Henceforth cited as *OGH*]

³ The idea of the Axial Age has been used in approaches to the history of religion, most prominently by Robert N. Bellah. See his *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. Contrary to Bellah, this essay does not address the role of the Axial Age in the historical development of religions; instead, I take it as expression of a religious or faith-based disposition.

⁴ John Torpey, *The Three Axial Ages: Moral, Material, Mental*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2017, p. 8.

⁵ Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

⁶ Kurt Salamun, "Moral Implications of Karl Jaspers'

For Jaspers, the idea of philosophical faith has the potential to induce a renewal of religious experience in modernity. This type of faith, however, is characterized by inner tensions between the philosophical interpretation of religion and the traditional elements that belong to religious beliefs; tensions that are comparable to the ones that emerge in the idea of the Axial Age. The following section addresses the role of philosophical faith in the conception of the Axial Age, namely, the fact that the unity of the history of humans can only be conceived through faith, not as a matter of fact. Still, Jaspers assumes that the Axial Age is also a historical reality and that arguments against this reality are eventually not strong enough even if it cannot be proven in the proper sense. Tracing Jaspers' Eurocentric prejudices can substantiate the strongest arguments against the empirical reality of the Axial Age. Eventually there is a moral commitment that underlies the faith in a common history of humans. The goal of this essay is not so much to resolve the tensions surrounding the idea of the Axial Age but to show a way in which one can make sense of the idea even if these tensions ultimately cannot be eliminated and the assumption of its historical reality continues to be problematic.

Tracing the Inner Tensions in the Idea of a Secular Religion

The notion of a secular religion is understood in a variety of ways, which makes it appropriate to start by specifying how this notion is not being used here. Contrary to Paul Vitz and others who have embraced secular religion in a quasi-religious way, I am not concerned with secular theories, such as Marxism and psychoanalysis.⁷ I am also not concerned with what has been called a civil religion, that is, with the belief in a higher being and a set of norms that are adopted on grounds of their social and political benefits.⁸ Taking the point of departure directly from Jaspers, I am

Existentialism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49/2 (December 1988), 317-323.

⁷ Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann Publishing, 1977.

⁸ The notion of a civil religion is laid out theoretically in Rousseau's treatise *On the Social Contract*. For the claim that there are historical examples of such a belief, see Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Journal of the American Arts and Sciences* 96/1 (Winter 1967), 1-21.

interested to see how philosophical thinking relates to and incorporates elements of religion. Compared to the idea of a civil religion, philosophical thinking can be taken as a reflective and primarily individual activity that is being pursued without an eye toward public utility. In contrast to the fact that some secular theories are used in a quasi-religious way, Jaspers' approach is seeking to establish common roots with religion and cannot only be called religious on account of presenting itself as being some final theory of life.

Jaspers' approach to religion centers on the idea of philosophical faith, which arguably entails a quite ambitious claim. If philosophy can lead to a genuine disposition of faith, then humans do not need historical religions to engage in such practice. Faith could then quasi-naturally develop out of one's philosophical thought. In formal terms, faith can be defined as the "becoming-aware of being out of the origin," as a philosophizing that speaks "from out of" the encompassing and "in orientation toward it."⁹ Under the condition of modernity, this claim acquires particular weight. Jaspers sees great "jeopardy" and "brittleness" in the religious practices of his time and fears that "the churches will not remain convincing."¹⁰ Traditional beliefs can no longer rely on carrying themselves a binding force. This means that philosophical thinking not only can but even has to articulate the true meaning of religious beliefs: what religion expresses, somewhat imperfectly and obscurely, through symbols, myths, and rituals, philosophy can validate by tracing it back to the main conditions of human existence. Philosophy can show the origin of religion not in some historical revelation but in experiences that are being made universally by humans (*OGH* 19). In addition, through the "translation, explication and interpretation"¹¹ of the testimonies of religious belief humans can achieve "something that really matters: in our case,

the issue is the appropriation of the Biblical faith and its transformation into a faith effective today" (*MC* 32). Philosophy can show the hidden truth of religious ideas and bring about a "renewal of religious faith out of the origin" (*PG* 82). Such a renewal is only possible, however, because philosophical faith has always been at the origin of religion, even if it was not recognized as such: to critics, "we answer that philosophy is older than the biblical revelation, that it is existentially more original, being accessible to all humans as humans, and that it is fully capable of bearing and adopting truth in the Bible as well" (*PFR* 337).

Jaspers would be quick to add, however, that philosophy has no privileged access to the transcendent either. It cannot and must not become a religion of its own (*PG* 82, *MC* 51). For Jaspers there can be no abstract, conceptual religion that could be articulated by philosophy and then take the place of the traditional religions: "Insofar as all faith is historical, the truth of faith does not lie in a set of doctrinal propositions but in an origin which makes itself manifest in a variety of historical forms" (*PG* 86). All that philosophy can provide is liberation from meaningless practices and dogmatic ideas. It can create what may be called a hermeneutic openness that transforms the very idea of a religious experience. Still, insofar as philosophy captures for Jaspers the truth of religion, the core of religious experience needs to be conceived as a philosophical one.

Secular religion in Jaspers' sense is thus the attempt at a philosophical interpretation and appropriation of religion. One can find a precursor to this approach in Kant's work, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. According to Kant, morality leads "inevitably" to religion, understood as "idea of a mighty moral lawgiver outside the human being, in whose will the ultimate end (of the creation of the world) is what can and at the same time ought to be the ultimate human end."¹² Philosophy can show that the idea of God is entailed by the inherent ideas of reason, provided it is being properly understood. Jaspers' idea of philosophical faith is thus ambitious but by no means isolated. It follows Kant's approach insofar as in both approaches the origin of religious ideas is essentially

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube* (1948), München, DE: Piper Verlag 2017, p. 15 (my translation). [Henceforth cited as *PG*]

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, transl. E. B. Asthon, New York, NY: Harper & Row 1967, pp. 321-2. [Henceforth cited as *PFR*] The original title, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, was published in 1962.

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion Without Myth*, transl. Norbert Guterman, New York, NY: Noonday Press 1958, p. 20. [Henceforth cited as *MC*]

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, transl. and ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 35-6 (B VIII-IX). [Henceforth cited as *RBR*]

subjective. God appears as necessary for human thought not on grounds of speculative principles, such as the assumption of an ultimate foundation of all being. God is necessary because, for Kant, faith corresponds to the inner purposes of practical reason while for Jaspers faith completes the self-understanding of finite existence (PG 32). In the post-metaphysical age that starts with Kant, there is no place for a strictly objective account of a supreme being.

The subjective approach to religion is, however, characterized by inner tensions, namely by a dialectic that seems difficult to overcome. This dialectic can only be indicated with regards to Jaspers. The main tension arises between the inner, or subjective, reasons to adopt religious ideas and their external, or objective, content. Are there elements of religious experience that philosophy cannot appropriate, and if there are how does philosophy relate to them? In his controversy with Bultmann, Jaspers states: "I repudiate all creeds that can be formulated in objective terms." He continues by emphasizing that for Bultmann as a theologian, religious experience is not given in existential freedom "but through the mediation of a divine proclamation, which is bound historically to a given time and place" (MC 78). This includes particular beliefs, such as the belief in the divine nature of Jesus Christ, an idea that he himself rejects: "In Christ, Transcendence is no longer hidden in the diversity of divine ciphers; it is revealed as a monstrosity – the tangible reality of God" (PFR 146). Following Jaspers' notion of ciphers, the divine can only be grasped through an act of interpretation, in which one must assume that what is understood as being a manifestation of the divine, is never the divine itself. There need to be a manifold number of ciphers, and Christ can only be one of many possible ciphers, which means that from Jaspers' perspective he can only be considered as being human. The question is then what, or who, is the God that for Jaspers is an inherent element of philosophical faith (PG 30)? Jaspers distinguishes between the personal God of the Biblical tradition, who can only be a cipher, and the Godhead, which "means more than God, not less" (PFR 144). All ciphers are but "historic voices of the distant God," who remains forever hidden in them (PFR 325). But does there have to be a God at all in philosophical faith? And if there needs to be one, which idea of god is legitimate? Jaspers admits that his conception of God is "paradoxical," but he also emphasizes that there must not be a "vacuum": "cogitative forms" are

necessary to guarantee that the orientation toward the transcendent is no empty gesture (PFR 256). Arguably, the notion of cipher is self-refuting: either there is nothing thinkable beyond the ciphers, in which case they are no ciphers at all, or there is something thinkable, in which case they are also not ciphers but manifestations of what lies beyond. Emphasizing the latter, Harold Durfee writes:

There is a significant sense in which, for Jaspers, Jesus is a revelation of the encompassing. In attempting to disassociate himself from certain theories which he takes to be orthodox Christianity Jaspers too easily places himself over against the theory of revelation.¹³

Bultmann, in his answer to Jaspers, points to the same problem when he accuses Jaspers of not having "grasped the hermeneutic problem" (MC 62). For Bultmann, it is decisive to know how the truth of religious myths can be accessed, and what it is. Jaspers, however, has no means to distinguish between, say, adequate and misleading ciphers, for as long as a religious idea is deemed being a cipher, it is a possible experience of the hidden divine, regardless of its specific content. This means that philosophical faith is either both formalistic and empty, or secretly relies on the concrete reality of a given religion. In an attempt at defending Jaspers against Bultmann's criticism, Joanne Cho rightfully points out that religious commitments are often less certain than they seem and open to cultural change, which means that no religious belief is ever simply valid as it is.¹⁴ But this leaves open what religious commitments mean in a particular historical situation, so that Bultmann's concern is ultimately not being addressed. The paradoxical nature of philosophical faith would thus result from the fact that it is not really philosophical but simply faith.

A similar tension between subjective understanding and objective content arises in the conception of the Axial Age: the inner meaning that the age has for the historical subject stands in contrast to the specific historical events on which it is based. The following will show what this means.

¹³ Harold A. Durfee, "Karl Jaspers' Christology," *The Journal of Religion* 44/2 (April 1964), 133-148, here p. 145.

¹⁴ Joanne Miyang Cho, "Karl Jaspers' Critique of Rudolf Bultmann and His Turn Toward Asia," *Existenz* 5/1 (Spring 2010), 11-15, here p. 15.

The Axial Age and the Unity of History as an Instance of Philosophical Faith

For Jaspers, the Axial Age entails a reflection on the history of humanity in its entirety, a truly universal history, which "leads us...into the mystery of our humanity" (OGH xiii). Compared to empirical theories, his approach is based on an "article of faith" (*Glaubensthese*), according to which humanity has one common origin and one common goal (OGH xv). The truly universal history of mankind is thus stretched out, so to speak, between two poles both of which cannot be known in a proper sense but only grasped through symbols that allow for a variety of interpretations. The most important of these symbols is for Jaspers the myth of the creation of humanity: "All men are related in Adam, originate from the hand of God and are created after his image" (OGH xv, 249). As far as the other pole is concerned, all souls will eventually be united in concord and understanding (OGH xv). While the idea of the Axial Age is historical, the ultimate horizon that defines this history can only be understood in a religious way.

One could argue that, of course, the assumption of a beginning and an end, or an origin and a goal is necessary, if history is to be seen as a unity at all. The multitude and variety of historical details does not allow for a unified vision if taken in an empirical way. Jaspers adopts the Kantian notion of a regulative idea that is projected over a multitude of instances in order to identify unifying traits. Unity is a "postulate," not a fact (OGH 250).¹⁵ It is also analytically true that if there is no beginning and end, there is simply no historical development at all. History is the idea of multiple events "being 'interrelated' through a beginning and an end" (OGH 26), as a process that tends into a certain direction. History, in other words, is a teleological idea, a striving toward a resolution and a goal, which involves more than a mere sequence of events on the axis of time.

Nonetheless, these arguments only explain why some unity must be assumed in the conception of historical developments, not why there needs to be unity in the development of humanity as a whole. It does not establish why the postulate of an overarching unity needs to be adopted at all. This unity cannot

¹⁵ For the Kantian origin of the notion, see also OGH 260. The Axial Age is a scheme that allows to do justice both to unity and openness in history (OGH 262). Unity is only a symbol, an infinite task and a remote point of reference (OGH 264). For the Kantian notion, see *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 672-3.

be explained by means of biology or anthropology, it is not merely a fact. First, the existence of the species homo sapiens does not imply the unity of its members but coexists with the assumption of infinite individual differences: "We look into a seething ocean of forms, in which clear-cut divisions only exist in the foreground, in seeming, for a moment – not absolutely and for ever" (OGH 39-40).¹⁶ Second, the emergence of human life is in itself the "deepest enigma of all," Jaspers claims (OGH 34). "The very fact that we do not know what man really is, is an essential part of our humanity" (OGH 35). Biological traits cannot be used to explain the characteristic difference of human nature for even if an explanation based on biology could be given, it would depend in turn on the assumption of this very difference (OGH 38). This all means that while the assumption of a unified history implies the assumption of a common essence of humanity, it cannot be deduced from any prior knowledge of this essence. The unity of history can only be stated, because "the belief in the unity of mankind...has grown, in the course of history, into an integral part of the human make-up" (OGH 42). Among humans, the conviction has grown that they are in fact one, and this conviction can only be articulated as an instance of faith. Unity is therefore doubly inexplicable: it cannot be explained how the faith in unity has indeed grown, and it cannot be explained, or known, in what this unity consists. There is no unifying trait on which the idea of humanity can be based, or if there is one it already presupposes the faith in a unifying element. Projecting the image of a common origin is thus the only way in which the unity of humanity can be articulated without incurring the problem of verification: precisely because the origin is unknowable it can be posited as an origin. A knowable origin would be none. Faith is explored in opposition to knowledge, in the manner of a *credo quia absurdum est*.

However, it would be incorrect to explain the faith in humanity merely as an epistemic attitude. The methodological considerations outlined in this section are only one aspect of the notion. For Jaspers, faith is rooted in existence.¹⁷ For the sake of this current analysis

¹⁶ Jaspers also explains this claim through the lack of a "primal race" (*Urrasse*) of humans (OGH 39), although the assumption of individual differences is already sufficient to prove his point.

¹⁷ It seems equally incorrect, however, to exclude all cognitive elements from the idea of faith and see it as a purely existential attitude. For such an interpretation,

it can be said that a moral meaning is present insofar as human existence defines the ultimate horizon of all moral ideas. This presence allows one to link Jaspers' notion of faith to Kant's claim of morality as being the origin of religion, even if Jaspers avoids the specific terminology of moral reason in his own approach. The moral dimension of the faith in humanity will be addressed anon; but first I must say more about the dialectical tensions that lie in the idea of the Axial Age. These tensions support the claim that it is important to conceive of the Axial Age as an expression of faith.

The Factual Elements of the Axial Age and the Problems Related to Them

As said before, the account of the Axial Age is meant as a truly universal "world history" (OGH 1). In this age, the deepest of all changes, a leap in the development of humanity occurs, and an intellectual and spiritual framework emerges that henceforth determines the self-understanding of all humans (OGH 2). In historical terms, the Axial Age comprises the philosophical and religious worldviews that emerge between 800 and 200 BC in China, India, Iran, Palestine, and Greece, uniting figures as different as Confucius, Laozi, the Buddha, the Biblical prophets, the Pre-Socratics, and the tragic poets. Without knowing from each other or being influenced by each other, these figures articulate the fundamental categories that determine human thinking until the present time. In the Axial Age, humans determine their place in the world as a whole, reach out beyond themselves to spheres of the transcendent, and develop worldviews striving for universal validity (OGH 4).

According to Jaspers, the worldviews that had developed during the Axial Age have an influence on all other humans, beyond the regions in which they were conceived (OGH 7). The Axial Age consists of a series of singular events, but as an axis these events acquire a paradigmatic force. This force, however, is more intellectual and spiritual than political and social. The historical events that follow are varied and show no unified tendency at all. Jaspers is well aware that his claim of a hidden axis in human history is only an attempt. It is not even clear whether adducing historical insights would confirm the hypothesis or

lead to its rejection (OGH 6). But in a sense, the very idea of a hidden axis is such that no historical, empirical confirmation can ever be achieved. The idea is not forced upon history as a scientific claim (OGH 8). What counts for Jaspers is that a common truth can be sensed in the encounter of different cultures.

If this is the case, however, then the idea of the Axial Age is less a claim about history than a certain use of history for the purpose of a philosophical quest. Jaspers defines history as being "at one and the same time happening and consciousness of this happening" (OGH 234). He also claims that "truth is that which links us to one another" (OGH 10). One can take these two statements to mean that humans establish their common history through their very reflection, so that whatever they find as unifying indeed is what in fact unites them. One can also say that they establish their common history through the faith in having such a history. Humans are both the objects and the subjects of the historical vision they share. But such an interpretation would be too extreme for it would suggest that history is merely the result of interpretations, no more than a construct even if this construct would be believed with religious intensity. It would then not be clear whether a period like the Axial Age does in fact exist, as humans could find unifying events and ideas in many other ways. Jaspers insists that the Axial Age is not only a figure or symbol of philosophical reflection but at the same time a historical reality. It is based in an objective series of events even if the meaning of these events only discloses itself subjectively, or for the inwardness of philosophical faith. This means that one should not be too quick in trying to resolve the tension that is manifest in his conception: without any objective dimension, the inward reflection may well be void and arbitrary.

The tension outlined here is evidently parallel to the one that plagues secular religion: the faith in a common history needs to be grounded objectively, but no factual instance in history can directly support it. Jaspers, however, seems not really being bothered by this point. For him, objections against the reality of the Axial Age ultimately have no bearing, which means that its historical objectivity can be maintained even if no direct proof exists. Jaspers himself mentions some of the obvious counterarguments against the Axial Age himself. The first and most fundamental objection is that there is no such thing as a unified Axial Age but only a series of specific and very different periods and events. Jaspers turns this argument against itself. Is there not a certain congruence even if one cannot prove

see Raymond Langley, "Three Interpretations of the Content of Jaspers' Faith," in *Philosophical Faith and the Future of Humanity*, eds. Helmut Wautischer, Alan Olson, Gregory Walters, New York, NY: Springer Verlag 2017, pp. 135-45.

it? The mystery that lies in the synchronic development of groundbreaking ideas, for him, only grows bigger the more one unravels it (OGH 13). In other words, the more one tries to say that the ideas are not the same, the more one affirms that they are in fact comparable. One cannot refute the wonder and amazement about the given historical parallelism by merely pointing at differences regarding specific instances. The historical facts do not so much contradict but rather suggest an underlying unity.

It has also been objected that the assumption of an Axial Age is based on value judgments, on the preference of certain cultural products over others. Yet for Jaspers, understanding is the same as evaluating. Readers of history are to feel concerned and affected (OGH 9). Another often repeated objection states that there is no common history, no real contact between cultures. But for Jaspers, the Axial Age is not based on the idea of linear influence but rather on a parallelism (OGH 10). No causal influence needs to have occurred. Finally, as noted above, the parallelism is only valid in the beginning of the period. "The Axial Period too ended in failure. History went on" (OGH 20), Jaspers states, which means that diverging developments which occur over the course of centuries cannot refute the assumption of an axis forming itself at one point.

Again, Jaspers' counterarguments are not meant to provide a proof for the existence of an Axial Age. All they state is that no argument is strong enough to deny that there is at least some historical objectivity in the idea of the existence of this age. But as the following will show, there are other arguments against the historical reality of the Axial Age that cannot so easily be overcome.

Jaspers' Prejudices: The Axis and Cultural Diversity

The most powerful objections against the Axial Age are not raised by Jaspers himself. These objections concern not so much the factuality of historical events but rather the question whether there is a period that can be called axial. The axial position assumes that some cultural achievements have become paradigmatic for others, which then follow and absorb what the axial cultures have produced. This assumption is based on a series of prejudices. Firstly, it favors written documents over other cultural practices, which are "scarcely accessible to us" (OGH 24). Secondly, it involves the idea of a ranking between primal people (*Naturvölker*) who are untouched by the progress of humanity, advanced

civilizations or high cultures (*Hochkulturen*), and finally axial cultures (OGH 7). For Jaspers, the ancient high cultures lack the awakening of the axial cultures and have not reached a proper "break-through" (OGH 52). However, for example, Jan Assmann argues that this assumption follows a normative standard that cannot do justice to the achievements of different cultures.¹⁸ Thirdly, Jaspers seems to follow the romantic idea of cultures as living entities that can be understood and compared holistically. For example, he refers collectively to "the Jews and Greeks, who created the basis of the Western world" (OGH 52). Axial thinkers, however, such as Confucius and Socrates, could be regarded as isolated figures without transferring their achievements to whole cultures. At the end, the Axial Age is a constellation of intellectual and religious figures, or even just a constellation of the texts that they produced. Nothing prevents one from assuming these texts have been written against the development of the cultures to which they belong. The Axial Age would then form a sort of counter-history, as Stephen Balch suggests, one that is separate from the history of political and economic empires.¹⁹ It is no doubt an undue generalization to think of all Jewish and Greek culture as being dominated by the achievements of some of its members. However, Jaspers does not pursue such alternatives narratives.

Fourthly, as Boy and Torpey argue, Jaspers approach is Eurocentric, despite his attempt at developing a truly universalistic view.²⁰ Ideas stemming from the Judeo-Christian tradition dominate his account of the unifying traits in axial thinkers, such as the idea of a divine creation of humans. Following Kant, who saw Christianity as the main example for a religion of reason (*RBR* 132),²¹ European and Jewish

¹⁸ Jan Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age," in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, eds. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 2012, pp. 366-410, here pp. 398-401.

¹⁹ Stephen Balch, "The Anti-Axial Age," *Society* 54/4 (August 2017), 346-351.

²⁰ John D. Boy, John Torpey, "Inventing the Axial Age: The Origins and Uses of a Historical Concept," *Theory and Society* 42/3 (March 2013), 241-259, here pp. 248-50.

²¹ In the original edition B 189f. For Christianity as a natural religion, "of which (once it is there) every human being...can be convinced through their reason" (*RBR* 154-5; B 232, 236).

sources provide for Jaspers the intellectual core of the axis of history.²² He emphasizes the "great analogy" between Western and Asian cultures, mostly India and China (*OGH* 55), and so argues against the prejudices of earlier times, which saw in the Eastern civilizations a lower degree of cultural and intellectual development. However, Jaspers also writes,

the history of China and India does not fall into such clear-cut divisions as that of the West, it does not contain the same clarity of opposites, nor the lucidity of spiritual conflict. [*OGH* 57]

For example, the chapter on "The Specific Quality of the West" (*OGH* 61-6) is a clear statement of the presumed superiority of Western culture. It also expands the undue generalizations mentioned before, especially when he refers to a unified and distinct Occident. Jaspers claims, "objective historical analysis reveals that the West has played a paramount role in shaping the world" (*OGH* 68), but nothing in his text provides a corresponding analysis or at least would lay out how such an analysis could be conducted.

Of course, each of these points deserves a deeper discussion, yet this short list suffices to show that there is an irresolvable tension when it comes to the assertion of an objective reality of the Axial Age. In concluding, I therefore want to come back to the religious meaning of this idea. With respect to the claim that the faith in a common history of humanity has a moral dimension, a more detailed explanation is now justified.

The Moral Dimension of Faith in the Axial Age

Philosophical faith provides to humans the opportunity to see their history as a unified one. In postulating a common origin through God, an origin that cannot be known, humans are capable to articulate faith in their belonging together. What will be shown here in this concluding section of the essay is that humans engage in philosophical faith because of the moral sentiment that is realized in it, even if this sentiment remains to some extent merely implicit in Jaspers' text. But the moral

dimension of the Axial Age is not difficult to discover, as the following four points attempt to demonstrate.

First, the idea of a common history of humanity affords limitless communication between cultures. The parallelism between the Axial Age thinkers is in itself an opportunity for communication, for mutual comparisons, and the bridging of the gaps between language and social contexts (*OGH* 19). In its most basic sense, history means that humans "are concerned with each other" (*sich angehen*, *OGH* 247). Despite the Eurocentrism mentioned before, Jaspers derives from the Axial Age an obligation to give up all claims to a privileged moral position: "It is as though the deity were issuing a warning, through the language of universal history, against the claim to exclusivity in the possession of truth" (*OGH* 20). Given that, a benevolent interpretation could so find ways to undermine the Eurocentrism from within. For example, although the relation to Asia is construed from the viewpoint of an untenable idea of the Occident, Jaspers at least shows the awareness that "what we lack and what vitally concerns us is to be found in Asia!" [*OGH* 69]

The second point is only mentioned in passing in the text yet would deserve more attention. History is the ground to which all humans are being tied. They need to be aware of the "grave responsibility" that lies in the task of understanding this common ground (*OGH* 231). Humans have certainly no responsibility to know all historical facts of their common existence, however they have the responsibility to project an idea of where this existence comes from and where it should lead. One can see this responsibility to be a pre-condition for all moral commitments towards others.

Third, the vision of the Axial Age is construed out of the present. It is the expression of a philosophical thought that "stand[s] firm" in the current crisis, Jaspers says (*OGH* 232). The current crisis results from what he calls the second Promethian age. After the first Promethian age which lead humanity to build the early civilizations, the new Promethian age of science and technology sets out to transform the entire planet. Its effects cannot be foreseen and its dynamic points toward the future. The current technological development unifies humanity factually and so forces it to recuperate its unity on a much deeper level (*OGH* 25). In general, the truth of history is only accessible in the present, in and for one's own "transition" through time (*OGH* 245). The same holds for faith, which is always only developed in given situations. Faith can so become the sign that humans experience the moral challenge that

²² The idea of philosophical faith is based explicitly on Western ideas, for example on the conceptions of God that were developed in ancient Greek philosophy and Jewish thought (*PG* 34, 63, 85). Buddhism is praised for its quest of transcendence yet according to Jaspers it leads to "the loss of all ciphers" in nothingness (*PFR* 268), which then leads to a loss of the world and so renders the idea of faith that he pursues impossible (*PFR* 279).

presents itself in the very times that they live.

Finally, according to Jaspers almost all goals of history that humans can adopt according to Jaspers carry a moral dimension. For him, the goal of history cannot be limited to one specific historical achievement as this would not be a goal for history in its entirety. The goal of all history needs to transcend the sphere for which it is set. All stated goals are therefore but symbols of the fact that there is such an overarching goal. Jaspers mentions four symbols that seem adequate: humanization and the complete rule of law, freedom, the emergence of extraordinary humans and geniuses, and the revelation of being in its depth, that is, God (*OGH* 256-7). One can assume that all these goals are worthy only insofar as they realize or complete the moral potential of human existence.

In summary, the parallelism to Kant again needs to be emphasized. Kant assumed that humans must postulate God in order to guarantee the final reality

of their moral ideas. With Jaspers, it is possible to say that humans must have faith in a common history in order to establish themselves as moral subjects in the crisis that they face. Presupposing a common history is a moral postulate for humanity insofar as it allows for deeper communication between cultures, calls for the responsibility that comes with the idea of a common ground, reflects the awareness of the present, and entails morally worthy goals. This way, one can make sense of the idea of an Axial Age despite the problems that it bears. The question would then be not whether the reality of history proves the Axial Age, or whether it is possible at all to construe an idea of human history around a common axis. The question rather would be whether the historical reality can be questioned in the light of philosophical faith. While Jaspers' conception fails as example of a philosophy of history, it remains important as a call to articulate the moral purpose of humanity in its transition through time.