

An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts



Volume 5, No 1, Spring 2010

ISSN 1932-1066

Jaspers' Axial Age Hypothesis: A Brief Restatement

Michael Zank
Boston University
mzank@bu.edu

Abstract: A reply to Professor Margolis' commentary presented at the bi-annual meeting of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America in conjunction with the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, New York, December 2009.

Jaspers' notion of an Axial Age makes a contribution to what we may call the history of the moral consciousness. In essence, it is about the rise of notions of transcendence. Jaspers' concept does two things at once: it makes us think of transcendence as a historical discovery, and it points to the fact that this discovery was made, more or less simultaneously in several distinct cultural contexts, without there being any evidence of mutual influence. The notion is therefore somewhat paradoxical in that it suggests that, though transcendence had to be discovered, its historical discovery in several places at more or less the same time allows us to think of a plurality of distinctive cultures, or rather their intellectual concerns, as related. Without saying as much, the coincidence of an emergence of similar notions across unrelated cultures gestures toward an underlying connection among us, across the globe, that neither attests to an absolute consciousness working itself out through the agency of a plurality of subjective consciousnesses, nor simply reaffirms an essential conception of humanity. It points to a unitive potential attested in the history of human spirit. The idea of an axial age is extremely rich in implications, but these implications are lost when one assumes that there actually was such an age. Before considering an application of the axial age hypothesis

one ought to consider its presuppositions and implications.

The Axial Age hypothesis is first and foremost a polemical conception, i.e., it needs to be understood as an alternative, a proposal by which Jaspers aimed to counter other previously circulating ideas about the historical genesis of the western consciousness, including its foundational conception of transcendence. Jaspers was not alone in looking at the history of civilization as profoundly characterized by shifts in consciousness. I am not referring here to the work of Lessing, Herder, and Hegel and their many antecedents and followers, who offered evolutionary, progressive, dialectic, or other models of sudden or gradual change, a conception of time and history that may be as old as biblical literature itself. What I mean is the context of the late 1920s when Jaspers first articulated his philosophy of history out of concern with a present that was widely felt as representing a decline and demise of the very paradigms on which it had been founded.

Jaspers' *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Munich: Piper, 1949), where the Axial Age hypothesis made its first appearance, was in many ways a reiteration, adjusted for the emerging global perspective of the years following WWII, of *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter

1931), which appeared as volume 1000 in the popular *Sammlung Göschen* of “brief and generally accessible” introductions to the latest state of knowledge in all fields. This book appeared in several further printings and Jaspers himself refers to it as a companion piece to the 1949 book. The theme raised in 1931 is technology and its implications for the human spirit. This remained a central concern for existentialist philosophy and was taken up by Heidegger as well. The context for the 1931 book was the then widely debated “crisis” of modernity. The historical approach to this question meant to ask for the beginning or origin of modernity in the larger sense of “our age.” Answers to this question varied according to one’s intuition and focus. If one saw the crisis of modernity primarily as a crisis of the authority of tradition, the beginning of the crisis could be located in Hobbes, Spinoza, or even earlier, in Machiavelli. What was meant by modernity itself, however, could be dated all the way back to the world inaugurated by Socrates and the Hebrew prophets. With Nietzsche, many considered both Platonism and Judeo-Christianity as the imposition of slave morality on an earlier form of humanity. This 1920s realization of the historicity of faith and ethics was more than historical critique, which began much earlier. What was new was that the incontrovertible realization of the historicity of our conceptions of human freedom and dignity led to a fundamental exposure of the human being as naked existence. To speak to this spiritual situation in the interest of a new humanism could not proceed as if nothing had happened. Jaspers struggled with the problem of how to affirm the reality of the demise of all great traditions while attempting to derive from history itself an affirmation of that tradition that could guide us into an uncharted future. Unlike others Jaspers felt disinclined to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. It is in that context and in light of such intentions that the notion of an Axial Age must be considered.

The real center of gravity of Jaspers' 1949 meditation on history is not the Axial Age as such but the future of those Western values that are rooted in the texts and traditions that first appeared in the middle of the millennium before Christ and from which Western civilization renewed itself until the modern technological age destroyed the plausibility of every and all tradition.

I became interested in Jaspers' Axial Age hypothesis in connection with a book I am writing on Jerusalem as a holy city. The history of the conception of this city, as reflected in its actual history as well as in the writings and rituals that relate to it, mirrors the history of Jaspers' axial age, namely, the rise of notions of transcendence in the ancient world, the conflicts between civilizations that harbored different notions of the mandates of transcendence, and finally the decline of tradition and its consequences. Jaspers' philosophical approach to history allows me to consider Jerusalem in an uncommon light. By looking at transcendence as a principle that unites Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in their many forms it is possible to see Jewish, Christian, and Muslim views of Jerusalem—in the age when transcendence was the accepted ground of all temporal reality—as variations on a theme. This allows me to distinguish this middle age (the age of transcendence, when the earthly Jerusalem merely signified an eternal reality) from its antecedent (the age when Jerusalem was not yet an allegory of heaven but literally—or rather metaphorically—the footstool of YHWH),¹ as well as from its successor (the age of power politics supported by a historical approach to biblical literature that includes both British colonialism and modern Zionism). All three attitudes are still present somewhere and in some form, but it is clear that the approach of the third age, which is also the age of colonialism, has lost its plausibility and we are short of good alternatives.

Professor Margolis restates my observations and thesis beautifully and succinctly. He recognizes the instrumental and rhetorical character of organizing the history of Jerusalem around the phenomenon of scripture, a Jaspers-like device of simplification that is meant to stimulate reflexion on a grand spiritual formation that is more or less receding into the past and whose receding leaves us puzzled and disoriented but also curious and attentive to our own limit-situation.

Margolis then raises the question of whether any philosopher, let alone Jaspers or Zank, has been able to capture a glimpse of humanity and he rightly points to

¹ The terminology I use here, including metaphor, and the focus on paradigmatic linguistic differences between the ages here distinguished, is borrowed from Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, Toronto: Academic Press 1983, chapter I.

Plato's elenctic dialogues as decisively articulating that our concepts and ideas of what is universally human inevitably fail or, more precisely, obscure rather than reveal what is man. I think that Jaspers would agree. But—not unlike other neo-Kantians (I mention Hermann Cohen in my essay)—it is the merit of Plato and his consorts, including the biblical prophets, to have raised the question. That our conventional answers, even the axial-age-ones, fail is precisely the starting point for Jaspers already in 1931. That's what makes him late modern, though not necessarily yet post-modern.

The term "monotheism" should perhaps be avoided altogether, as my colleague, Paula Fredriksen, has cogently suggested for the disciplinary contexts of biblical studies. The term is an artifice of the Baroque period, not a term native to what we mean to describe by it. Since Erik Peterson's famous 1935 statement against Carl Schmitt (*Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*) furthermore, the term has been altogether tainted by the connotations of political theology. "Monotheism" in that sense is a form of political organization, an acoutrement of caesarism and imperial propaganda and persuasion. But, as my historical work on Jerusalem made clear, at least to me, empire—despite all its failings—offered a kind of protection from nationalism. To be sure, this is the wisdom of a hindsight sickened by the realization that nationalistic conflicts sharpened by religious may be more destructive even than the clashes between empires Margolis seems to have in mind when speaking of the monotheistic formations doing battle against one another. It is nationalism rather than imperialism that has made what used to be monotheism (i.e., imperial rule over a plurality of nations) into the odious kind of chauvinism that we encounter today, a chauvinism that is the very opposite of the idea or goal of a universal humanity.

Margolis takes Jaspers (and my) consideration of the shift from pre-history to history as an opportunity to remind us of universal human traits embedded in our evolutionary history. In my simplified terms, our shared predisposition to self-expression both preserves and transcends the hominids that preceded "us." But this reminder of what we may call a spiritual disposition rooted in our evolutionary past merely leads us full-circle to the realization that it was a cultural achievement of the axial age to have begun the process by which we became conscious of this disposition, by which we began to recognize or

conceptualize ourselves as who (we think) we are. As Margolis points out himself, the problem is that it is impossible to derive any normative conclusions from descriptive statements of this kind. We are then no further than where Jaspers left us, except of course that Margolis would not recommend for us to look any further, whereas Jaspers believed in the necessity, as well as the potential, of looking further. This may be saying too much or, in fact, it may be falsifying the intended gesture, which is more negative, but as such, in somewhat Hegelian fashion, also positive and productive. It is all about the realization of the passing of past paradigms. I think it is here that Margolis parts company with Jaspers who remained interested in history and tried to keep us interested and engaged in it, as well.