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Article

Post-Secularism in a World-Historical Light: The Axial Age Thesis as an Alternative to Secularization

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Abstract: The secularization thesis claims that religion will lose its public influence as the forces of modernity advance. This hypothesis has long functioned as a paradigm within the humanities and social sciences. However, due to the apparent “resurgence” of publicly influential religion throughout the world in recent years, scholars have recognized that a “straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular” is no longer viable. I describe the current state of narrative perplexity regarding the changing place of religion in the modern world as the “post-secular problematic.” The aim of this article is to examine the contours of one specific post-secular narrative of religious change—the one that has crystallized around the concept of the axial age—and consider how it can be used to reconceptualize the public role of religion in the modern world.

Keywords: religion; axial age; secularism; post-secular; public religion; religious history

1. Introduction

As classically articulated, the secularization thesis claims that religion will lose its public influence as the forces of modernity advance. This is one of the few hypotheses to have achieved “a truly paradigmatic status” within the modern social sciences and humanities (Casanova 1994). Yet, the secularization thesis has recently fallen into disrepute. The main cause of this has been an apparent “resurgence” of publicly influential religion throughout the world.¹ As a result, contemporary scholars increasingly acknowledge that a “straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular” is no longer viable (Asad 2003, p. 1).

There is little agreement, however, about how to tell a better story of modern religious change. Maybe secularization theory was basically right and the public resurgence of religion is only a last-ditch effort by religious believers to halt their own demise. Perhaps the modern world is simply transitioning from one stage of religious history to the next. Alternatively, modernity might be a kind of religious disaster that arose because humanity left the true religious path behind. Or maybe “religion” never existed at all, but is simply a category constructed by the modern Westerners and then projected outward onto everyone else. Well-regarded thinkers actively argue for these and other narrative perspectives today.

I describe the current state of narrative perplexity regarding the changing place of religion in the modern world as the “post-secular problematic.” In a recent book, I developed a typology of the major narratives being advanced in this context (Schewel 2017). The aim of this article is somewhat different.

¹ See (Thomas 2005). Demographic studies that demonstrate the enduringly high levels of global religious belief and critical studies that expose the many class-based and Eurocentric elements of secularization theory have also played an important role. See (Philpott 2009; Asad 2003).

It examines the contours of one specific post-secular narrative of religious change—the one that has crystallized around the concept of the axial age—and considers how it can be used to reconceptualize the public role of religion in the modern world.

2. The Idea of an Axial Age

German philosopher Karl Jaspers articulated the concept of an axial age in 1949.² Rejecting the claim that Christianity constitutes the singular spiritual axis of history, he argued that history's true spiritual axis lies in the collection of religious-philosophical movements that erupted throughout Eurasia during the first millennium BCE. "The most extraordinary events," he writes, "are concentrated during this period . . . "

Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being [. . .] India produced the Upanishads and Buddha and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to scepticism, to materialism, sophism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught a challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer, of the philosophers—Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato—of the tragedians, Thucydides and Archimedes. Everything implied by these names developed almost simultaneously in China, India, and the West. (Jaspers 1953, p. 2)

Jaspers describes these movements as "axial" because they collectively established "the fundamental categories within which we still think today," as well as the philosophical and religious traditions "by which human beings still live" (Jaspers 1953, p. 2). For even later movements, such as Christianity, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, neo-Confucianism, and later the Protestant Reformation and the Italian Renaissance, continued operating within the basic parameters set by the movements of the axial age.

He locates the axial age alongside three other major historical turning points. "Four times," he explains, "man seems . . . to have started out from a new basis" (Jaspers 1953, p. 24). The first happened during the early days of human life, when the development of sophisticated tools and the domestication of fire propelled the global spread of humanity. The second began around 3000 BCE, when the first urban-imperial civilizations arose in the Fertile Crescent, and later in the Indus and Yellow River valleys. The third took place during the first millennium BCE, when resonant religious-philosophical movements erupted in Greece, Israel, Persia, India, and China. Finally, marking the fourth turning point, new scientific and technological powers created a densely interconnected world order.

Jaspers places these four turning points within a broad account of the twofold arch of historical progress:

The history of mankind visible to us took, so to speak, two breaths. The first led from the Promethean Age via the ancient civilisations to the Axial Period and its consequences. The second started with the scientific-technological, the new Promethean Age and may lead, through constructions that will be analogous to the organisation and planning of the ancient civilisations, into a new, second Axial Period, to the final process of becoming-human, which is still remote and invisible to us [And] whereas the first breath was, as it were, split up into several parallel ones, the second breath is being taken by mankind as a whole. (Jaspers 1953, p. 25)

² Eugene Halton demonstrated that John Stuart-Glennie independently developed the deeply resonant idea of a first millennium BCE "moral revolution" seventy-five years before Jaspers articulated the idea of an axial age. See (Halton 2014).

This “two breaths” model clarifies why Jaspers considers the socio-spiritual revolutions of the first millennium BCE to be *the* axis of history. They culminated the arch of civilizational development that had been underway since the dawn of human life and set the stage for the next arc of civilizational development, which will likely culminate in a similar process of collective socio-spiritual ferment.

3. An Axial Vision of Human History

Before considering how various thinkers use the axial age thesis to reframe debates about the role of religion in modern public life, it may be helpful to examine in greater detail the broad vision of religious history that they have put forth. To be clear, axial age theorists—which include Jürgen Habermas, Robert Bellah, Charles Taylor, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Samuel Huntington—describe aspects of religious history quite differently from one another. Yet when one considers their arguments as a whole, a common historical framework rooted in the four major periods of socio-spiritual transition that Jaspers identifies—early humanity, archaic civilization, the axial age, and the modern breakthrough—begins to emerge.

3.1. Tribal Societies and the Religion of Total Integration

The axial story of history begins with an analysis of tribal religious life. Tribal societies claimed that their social order emanates from the structure of reality itself. Or, as Habermas puts it, they bound “the collective identity of . . . the tribe to the cosmic order” (Habermas 1985, p. 56). Robert Bellah further explains how tribal societies used ritual to sustain their integrated socio-cosmic vision. For lacking external symbolic systems like writing in which to store their culture, ritual provided the only plausible means by which early peoples could create and maintain a meaningful world (Bellah 2011, p. 131). Chronologically, tribal groups spread throughout Afro-Eurasia and some areas of the Pacific by around 30,000 BCE, and throughout the Americas by around 12,000 BCE.

3.2. Archaic Empires and the Religion of Myth

The central feature of the archaic social order was the appearance of urban, imperial states that justified their authority through world integrating myths. Bellah argues that myths originally arose to support tribal ritual activity. He offers the example of the Brazilian Kalapalo tribe, which used acts of mythic narration as part of their ritual system (Bellah 2011, p. 139). However, as the size and complexity of societies grew, face-to-face ritual could no longer serve as the primary social glue. Early archaic societies managed this dilemma by detaching myth from ritual and binding it to the mediating function of a divinely chosen leader. And as the scope of archaic societies continued to expand, so too did the mythic status of this divinely chosen leader. In this light, Bellah argues that the archaic period was characterized by the transition, first, from large tribes into chiefdoms that united several tribal units, such as we find in the Polynesian islands, and, then, from large chiefdoms into expansive empires of divine kingship, such as we find among the Egyptians and the Shang and Zhou Chinese (Bellah 2011, p. 183).

Archaic empires were organized around the idea that only the divine king could harmonize humanity with the divine order. Each divine king thus felt compelled to substantiate his mediating claim by glorifying his own imperial rule. This glorifying imperative stimulated expansionist military endeavors, as well as efforts to construct monumental edifices, such as the Egyptian pyramids (Bellah 2011, p. 215).

Empires of divine kingship emerged in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus valley, and Northern China from around 3000–2000 BCE. Similar empires emerged in the Americas from around 500–1500 CE.

3.3. The Axial Age and the Rise of Religious-Metaphysical Worldviews

The major axial systems—which include Greek philosophy, Jewish prophecy, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Upanishadic Hinduism, Confucianism, and Taoism—differed from one another in significant ways. Yet they all displayed a novel reliance upon rationally articulated and universally

applicable religious-metaphysical worldviews (Habermas 1984, p. 254). Texts such as the Bible, the Analects, the Pali Cannon, and the Platonic Dialogues became the repositories for these new worldviews, and specialized interpretive communities formed in order to unravel and apply their ideas. Thus, as Charles Taylor notes, it was during the axial age that “monks, Bhikkus, sanyassi, devotees of some avatar or God [first] strike out on their own” and start “unprecedented modes of sociality: initiation groups, sects of devotees, the sangha, monastic orders and so on.” (Taylor 2012, p. 37). The first true traditions of scientific, philosophical, and theological inquiry emerged in these spaces.

One key characteristic of the axial age was the appearance of empires that used religious-metaphysical worldviews to unite their unprecedentedly vast domains. Examples of such empires include the Achaemenid, the Alexandrian, the Mauryan, and the Ming (Voegelin 2000). This dynamic continued until an interlinking network of five domains of religious-metaphysical influence, which we can respectively describe as Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, and Islamic, had emerged. Of course, other religious-metaphysical systems, such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Greek thought, continued to influence this wider Afro-Eurasian nexus, albeit now in either a more secondary (Judaism and Zoroastrianism) or diffuse (Greek thought) form. Regardless, by around 1000 CE, a single Afro-Eurasian ecumene of religious-metaphysical civilizations had appeared.³ No indigenous axial movements arose in the Americas.

3.4. *Revolutions and Multiple Modernities*

Axial age theorists recognize that the profound cultural transformation that took place in Western Europe from around 1600 to 1900 fundamentally altered the course of human history. This modern cultural transformation involved at least five major subsidiary revolutions: the Scientific Revolution; the Enlightenment; the Industrial Revolution; the popular political revolutions of the United States, France, and Russia; and the emergence of a global political economy (Hodgson 1993, pp. 44–45). The combined impact of these revolutions collectively disrupted the axial ecumene of religious-metaphysical civilizations. Each axial system provided a framework within which diverse cultures, peoples, and political units could navigate the increasingly cosmopolitan contexts of medieval Afro-Eurasia. The modern revolutions undermined the integrating function of the axial systems, as least as it had been traditionally maintained, by establishing radically new socio-spiritual conditions. Christianity was the first axial system to bear the brunt of modernity’s disruptive impact, though the others soon experienced a similar fate.

Nevertheless, the religious-metaphysical traditions stemming from the axial age did not simply disappear, as classical secularization theorists had hypothesized. To the contrary, they interacted with new modernizing forces in order to create diverse modern social configurations, each of which exhibited distinctive patterns of public religious life. Shmuel Eisenstadt helpfully describes this pattern, whereby diverse modernizing societies end up wrestling with “the basic tensions inherent in the modern program . . . more in terms of their own . . . Axial religions than in those of European Enlightenment,” as “multiple modernities.”⁴

4. Religion’s Future in an Axial Light

Axial age theorists have offered three normative frameworks for addressing the public role of religion in the post-axial context of multiple modernities.

The first is represented by Samuel Huntington, who argues that, in the post-Cold War period, “a civilization-based world order is emerging: societies sharing cultural affinities cooperate with each other; efforts to shift societies from one civilization to another are unsuccessful; and countries group themselves around the lead or core states of their civilization” (Huntington 1996, p. 20).

³ The Afro-Eurasian ecumene centered upon the territories and networks of Islamdom. See (Hodgson 1993, pp. 98, 117, 114, 106).

⁴ See (Eisenstadt 2000a, 2003).

Drawing explicitly on the axial age thesis and Eisenstadt's complementary framework of multiple modernities, he mentions six major contemporary civilizations—the Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Western, and Latin American, African, and Theravada—and argues that, in every instance, “religion is a central defining characteristic” (Huntington 1996, pp. 44–48). He concludes that we should abandon the goal of establishing universal standards for these civilizations, particularly on issues concerning the role of religion in the public sphere. Instead, if we are to avoid falling into a “global war of civilizations,” we must acknowledge the “multi-civilizational character of global politics” and find mutually agreeable ways of cooperating with one another despite our deep socio-spiritual differences (Huntington 1996, p. 21).

Jürgen Habermas's vision of post-metaphysical discourse constitutes a second approach. He argues that all modern peoples should see the emerging global public sphere as a space in which diverse religious-metaphysical worldviews can advance their respective insights. Such a public sphere should not align with any particular religious-metaphysical tradition. Habermas notes that naturalism constitutes its own religious-metaphysical tradition. Hence, its advocates must show the same public restraint as those who espouse some form of religion. The liberal framework of freedoms and rights established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the framework within which post-metaphysical public discourse should initially proceed. Yet the palate of concepts should expand as diverse religious-metaphysical systems make their respective contributions (Habermas 2008a, pp. 110, 121–22, 130–41).

Karl Jaspers presents a third option. Technological and economic forces, he argues, are rapidly fusing humanity together into a single civilizational unit. But humanity does not yet possess a socio-spiritual framework that can address the many challenges and opportunities that the processes of globalization present. Liberalism is too morally and spiritually truncated to accomplish this task, while the religious-metaphysical worldviews stemming from the axial and post-axial period are too laden by their own histories and traditions. Hence, our only hope is that a new and more globally oriented socio-spiritual framework will emerge, an event that Jaspers likens to a second axial age. Although the reality of this second axial age must remain “beyond our powers of imagination” until it has actually appeared, Jaspers envisions two possibilities. First, it might arise as the fruit of a new and universal pattern of inquiry into the spiritual dimensions of reality and human existence. Or, second, it could be catalyzed by a “fresh revelation from God,” which is to say by the appearance of some kind of new, globally oriented religious movement (Jaspers 1953, pp. 97, 127, 227).

Each of these three visions of religion's role in humanity's future aligns with the basic story of history that unfolds around the concept of the axial age. Yet they also each envision quite different trajectories. The Huntington framework sees religion as a major civilizational fault line that must be managed if we are to avoid a third world war. Habermas describes religion as a source of insight that can be deployed within a still largely liberal pattern of global public discourse. And Jaspers considers religion to be a wellspring of transformation that can help create a new world order.

5. The Prospects of Transformation

Each approach provides important insights. However, Jaspers's vision of a second axial age offers the most far-reaching reconceptualization of the role of religion in the modern public sphere. It posits that even the kind of modified liberalism that Habermas recommends cannot provide humanity with a framework for world order. It also suggests that humanity's diverse socio-spiritual traditions of the world are still too potent to simply be subsumed by liberalism. Hence, if we want to envision a future in which humanity avoids sinking into the kind of relativistic *realpolitik* that Huntington's “clash of civilizations” thesis suggests, Jaspers argues that we have no choice but to conclude that a new socio-spiritual order stands on our collective horizon. This is the aim of Jaspers's concept of a second axial age, to orient our minds toward the emergence of something new, or to convince us, as Hodgson puts it, that “the future is still open” (Hodgson 1993, p. 230).

One hesitation that some readers may have when considering the viability of Jaspers's transformation-based framework concerns its potential lack of practicality. Why should we spend time thinking about a second axial age when there are still so many empirical and practical questions concerning the role of religion in modern public life that need to be addressed?

I see at least three plausible responses to this concern, one conceptual, one empirical, and the other normative. First, adopting the kind of transformation-based framework that Jaspers suggests encourages us to develop ways of thinking about the public role of religion that go beyond the longstanding secular-religious divide. The "post-secular" is one such concept that Habermas has productively employed, as is Eisenstadt's notion of "multiple modernities" and Taylor's vision of modern Western culture as a kind of spiritually cross-pressured "immanent frame" (Habermas 2008b; Eisenstadt 2000b; Taylor 2007). The aim of these concepts is to help us think and speak about the modern world in ways that acknowledge the central and enduring role of religion in public life.

Second, a transformation-based vision of modern religion encourages new kinds of empirical analyses. Contemporary discussions of public religion tend to focus on the efforts of religious actors to either win elections, influence policies, or disrupt established political and economic systems through violent and coercive means (e.g., terrorism and revolution). Of course, scholars operating within a transformation-based framework would appreciate these lines of inquiry. But they would also expand the range of subjects considered to include efforts of religious actors to constructively transform the patterns of collective existence upon which public life depends.

In a recent book, several authors examined the worldwide Bahá'í community in this light (Cameron and Schewel 2018). One of the basic arguments they made was that the specific strategies that the Bahá'í community employed in its efforts to, for example, contribute to the UN discourse on gender equality, promote a conversation amongst policymakers and practitioners about the relationship between science, religion, and development, and facilitate the global resettlement of Iranian Bahá'ís refugees, only make sense in light of the community's broader project of contributing to the creation of a materially and spiritually united world civilization.⁵ Similar analyses—which frame publically oriented religious efforts in terms of the broader visions of transformation that lie behind them—could be undertaken with regard to the efforts of other religious communities, whether historically or today.

Finally, third and relatedly, adopting a Jaspersian framework of transformation reorients normative debates. Instead of focusing only on questions concerning the role of religion in a liberal public sphere, theorists would additionally consider how insights from different religious traditions could be used to reconceptualize the very relationships—between individuals, communities, institutions, and reality as a whole—that sustain public life. The efforts of Alasdair MacIntyre to use the Thomist-Benedictine virtue tradition to critique and reorient modern moral discourse can be interpreted as an early version of this approach, as can John Hick's attempt to establish an inter-religiously valid account of the spiritual good (MacIntyre 2007; Hick 2005). Nevertheless, such analyses provide only a glimpse of the vast project of normative inquiry that could be pursued in relation to the full spiritual heritage of humankind.

Regardless of where one comes down within the broader conversation about the nature and consequences of the axial age, the broader point remains that our visions of humanity's past and future matter when thinking about the role of religion in modern public life. They shape the way we understand ongoing patterns of religious change and frame the possibilities we see for public religious influence today. Reflections on the past and the future accordingly have a very practical role to play in the broader project of reconceptualizing public religion. The growing body of literature surrounding the axial age thesis should be interpreted in this light; it attempts to reconceptualize the public role of modern religion by retelling the story of religion's past and future trajectories.

⁵ See in particular (Cameron and Schewel 2018, pp. 1–12, 163–90).

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