

Karl Jaspers On Axial Period

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Abstract: Axial Age is the period when, the great intellectual, religious and the philosophical systems came into shape and the subsequent human societies and cultures emerged with the ancient Greek philosophers, Indian metaphysicians and logicians (who articulated the great traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, Persian Zoroastrianism, the Hebrew Prophets, the “Hundred Schools” of ancient China. These are only some of the representatives of Axial tradition that emerged and took roots during that time. The phrase originated with the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers, who noted that during this period there was a shift – or a turn, as if on an axis – away from more predominantly localized concerns and towards transcendence.

All human beings can share the reality of universal transformation of mankind through Axial Period. Although confined to China, India and the west and though there was to begin with no contact between these three worlds, the Axial period nonetheless founded universal history and, spiritually, drew all men into itself.

Keywords: Axial, Civilization, Traditions, Philosophical, Axis, Reason, Radical, Conscious

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Karl Jaspers, an axis of world history, world have to be discovered empirically, as a fact capable of being accepted by all men, Christians included. This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which since then, man has been able to be, the point was fruitful in fashioning humanity; its character would have to be, if not empirically cogent and evident, yet so convincing to empirical insight as to give rise to a common frame of historical self-comprehension for all people. For the west, for Asia, and for all men on earth, without regard to particular articles of faith. This axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 to 200 B.C. It is there that we met the deepest dividing lines in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this as Axial Period (Jaspers. K, 1953, 1).

Jaspers says it was the age of major advances in world's political, philosophical and religious systems. These major changes dominated the thinking in the following centuries and millennia:

- ✓ 6th century BCE was a period of radical change in the basic religious concepts and also there was an emergence of new ideas. There was a change in humanity's spiritual development which became a source of our present day faith traditions.
- ✓ There was a great advance in religion, philosophy, science, democracy in the years centering around 500 BCE. Many forms of art occurred in China, India, middle east and Greece. Many sociological, cultural, economic and spiritual changes were made.
- ✓ In China many individual thinkers such as Confucious, No Tzu and Lao-Tse began to reflect the ethical and metaphysical implications of human existence. From their teachings arose Confucianism and Daoism.
- ✓ In India the authors of Upanishads had metaphysical thinking in search of ultimate truth and meaning of life and death. India produced the teachings of Buddha and Mahavira and experienced a dramatic and socio-political and economic transformation. New teachings ran to the philosophical schools of thought including skepticism, materialism, sophism, nihilism.

- ✓ In Palestine the prophets of Elijah, Isaiah made their appearance. The law and moral codes of Israelites dates back to before this age.
- ✓ The development in Greece was more philosophical than spiritual. Greece had witnessed the appearance of Thales, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Democritus and Parmenides.

Reason became the tool to search ultimate reality and human destiny. Basic religious ideas were laid down which people have been living ever since. To give all these spiritual process a name, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers coined the phrase "Achsenzeit" or "Axial Age" in English in the year 1949.

In this age man became conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of this world and his powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in transcendence.

Consciousness became conscious of itself, thinking became its own subject. Spiritual conflicts arose, accompanied by attempts to convince others through the communication of thoughts, reason and experiences. The most contradictory possibilities were essayed. Discussion, the formation of parties and the division of the spiritual realm into opposites which nonetheless remained related to one another, created unrest and movement to the very brink of spiritual chaos.

The philosophers appeared for the first time in this era only. Human beings dared to rely on themselves as individuals. Man proved capable of contrasting himself within the entire universe. He discovered within himself the origin from which to raise himself above his own self in the world.

The Chinese philosophers – Confucius, Mo-ti and others – wanted about the country and visited places favorable to the spiritual life, founding schools which are termed academics by sinologists. The sophists and the philosophers of Hellas travelled about in similar fashion and Buddha passed his entire life in wandering from place to place.

Axial age was an age of simultaneous destruction and creation. The highest potentialities of thought and practical expression realized in the individuals did not become common property, because the majority of men were unable to follow in their footsteps. When the age lost its creativeness, a process of stagnation and leveling down appeared in all the three cultural realms. Out of a disorder that was growing intolerable, arose a striving after new ties, through the re-establishment of enduring conditions.

According to Jaspers the universal empires which came into being at the end of Axial period considered themselves founded for eternity. But their stability was only apparent. Though these empires lasted for a long time by comparisons with the state formations of the Axial period, in the end they all decayed and fell into pieces. Subsequent millennia produced an extraordinary amount of change. From one point of view the disintegration and re-establishment of great empires has constituted the history ever since the end of the Axial period, as it had constituted it through the millennia during which the ancient civilizations were flourishing. During these millennia, however, it had possessed a great significance; it had lacked that spiritual tension which was

first felt during the Axial period and has been at work ever since, questioning all human activity and conferring upon it a new meaning.

II. CONSEQUENCES OF AXIAL PERIOD

- ✓ People have become conscious of themselves and their limitations. Their view of their position in the world changed fundamentally. Philosophy and science emerged.
- ✓ Attempt of reordering the world developed in most spheres of human existence within competitive world views.
- ✓ Drastic changes in religious traditions occurred often leading to a collapse of previously established systems of beliefs.
- ✓ The major world religions which humans still follow were established. Each is unique in their own way.
- ✓ Accountability to a higher authority – God, divine law emerged e.g. the King God was replaced by a secular ruler accountable to a higher order.

Many years old civilization was brought to an end by the Axial period. The ancient cultures only persist in those elements which enter into the Axial period and become part of the new beginning. The monumental element in religion and religious art and the extensive state formations and judicial systems corresponding to it, are the objects of awe and admiration to the consciousness of the Axial Period: they are even taken as models but they are seen in a new light and change their meaning.

Today also mankind has lived by what happened during the Axial period, by what was thought and created during that period. In each new upward flight, it returns in recollection to this period and is fired anew by it.

Victor Von Strauss, in his wonderful commentary, p. ixiv (1870), says: 'During the centuries when Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, a strange movement of the spirit passed through all civilized peoples. In Israel Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel and Ezekiel were prophesying and in a renewed generation (521-516) the second temple was created in Jerusalem. Among the Greeks Thales was still living. Anaximander, Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Xenophanes appeared and Parmenides was born. In Persian an important reformation of Zarathustra's ancient teaching seems to have been carried through, and India produced Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism' (Ibid., p. 8,9)

Many philosophers and many saints appeared during the Axial period. There was an penetration of Buddhism in China, which took place at the end of Axial period, did a profound spiritual communication between India and China.

Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC) was also born in this period. He was a teacher and an influential political figure known for his popular aphorisms and for his models and social interaction.

Zoroastrianism, although the smallest of the major world religion also came into existence in this era.

"Upanishads" which is a very important literature of Hinduism was also written in this era.

We find the Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Socrates during the Axial period only.

III. CONCLUSION

To visualize the facts of the Axial period and to make them the basis of our universal conception of history is to gain possession of something common to all mankind, beyond all differences of creed. It is one thing to see the unity of history from one's own ground and in the light of one's own faith, another to think of it in communication with every other human ground, living one's own consciousness to the alien consciousness. In this sense, it can be said of the centuries between 800 and 200 B.C. that they are the empirically evident of world history for all men (Ibid., p. 19).

All human beings can share the reality of universal transformation of mankind through Axial period.

Jaspers says that if we are concerned with the history of philosophy, the Axial period affords the most rewarding field of study and the one most fruitful in respect of our own thought.

It may be called an interregnum between two ages of great empires, a cause of liberty, a deep breath bringing the most lucid consciousness.

The Axial period becomes a ferment that draws humanity into a single context of world history. It presumes, for us, a yardstick with whose aid we measure the historical significance of various people to marking as a whole.

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