The Tangled Cultural History of the Axial Age: A Review of Jan Assman’s *Achsenzeit*

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Abstract: Jan Assmann’s *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (2018) is the most thorough presentation of thinkers who reflected on the Axial Age available today. Although the label “Axial Age” was coined by Karl Jaspers in 1946, other scholars had touched on the issue as early as 1771. From the beginning, socio-historical analyses rested on a presentist framework according to which the Axial Age was interpreted as a positive historical legacy that could be exploited to make up for the deficiencies of the present. *Achsenzeit* excels in the discussions covering the time span from Anquetil-Duperron to Vögelin (1975), but it disappoints in relation to current debates. Unfortunately, Assmann’s book ignores contemporary gene-culture co-evolutionary perspectives, as well as current research which argues for the convergent evolution of axial-age societies based on increased affluence, enhanced urbanization processes, and higher population density. These criticisms aside, the book is indispensable for the necessary knowledge of the pre-2000s discussion on the topic, and it is a highly pleasurable read.

Keywords: Ancient History; Axial Age; Cultural Evolution; Historiography.

Jan Assmann’s *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (2018) testifies to a German book market in which scholarly books can still attract enough readers to produce a bibliophile monograph of high quality with even a bound bookmark. It is a pleasure to know that such books can still be made for a reasonable price.

Assmann hardly needs an introduction. He is a prolific scholar and a world-renowned authority on ancient Egyptian religion. He has contributed significantly, often in tandem with his wife, Aleida Assmann, to renewing memory studies (following in the steps of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora). In recent years, Assmann has taken part, although slightly uncooperatively as he has been keen to point out, in the discussion of the Axial Age by adopting a fairly sceptical attitude towards the phenomenon, if not outrightly disavowing its existence, or, occasionally, arguing for its emergence by the middle of the 14th century BCE during the reign of 18th-dynasty
Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (Assmann 1992; Assmann 2012). At the same time, though, Assmann has now acknowledged how the theme of the Axial Age has accompanied his entire career since the fateful reading of Karl Jasper’s *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* when he was a *Gymnasiast*, thus exerting a decisive influence on the choice of his disciplinary specialization (Assmann 2018: 9). Moreover, Assman grew up in a home in which discussions of Jaspers’ book and Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (“The Decline of the West”, 1918; 1922) in the wider context of conversations on Jean Gebser’s *Ursprung und Gegenwart* (“The Ever-present Origin”, 1949, 1953) were a daily occurrence. After a long state of lethargy, Assmann’s interest in the Axial Age was renewed when he was invited to partake in Shmuel Eisenstadt’s resuscitation of the idea in the seminars the latter hosted in Jerusalem between 1975 and 2008.

In his most recent *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (2018), Assmann presents the most thorough historiographical discussion hitherto of the Axial Age as a research theme from early modern scholarship to the present. Recently, Dieter Metzler has briefly addressed the issue and Hans Joas has provided the previously most exhaustive examination of earlier Axial Age advocates (Metzler 2009; Joas 2014). Assmann’s discussion, however, is by far the most extensive and nuanced treatment of those individual thinkers who touched on the issue and made specific claims about a distinct socio-religious development occurring around the middle of the first millennium BCE in a number of Eurasian cultures (in Jasper’s wider chronology, this period covers a time span ranging from 800 to 200 BCE). Out of the 20 names mentioned by Metzler and Joas, Assmann focuses his discussion on the 12 most significant scholars and divides the scholarly discussion into three major phases:

1. From Anquetil-Duperron to Jaspers excluded
2. Jaspers and partly Erich Vögelin
3. From Shmuel Eisenstadt (1972) to the present

While this is just a rough and personal periodization, it would have been just as obvious to have the third phase begin with the seminal mid-1960s paper by Bellah entitled “Religious Evolution” (1964) and to begin a whole new fourth phase with Bellah’s new article and books from the 2000s (Bellah 2005; Bellah 2011; Bellah and Joas 2012; see below). Additionally, there is a significant bias underlying the whole discussion which is detrimental to the very argument Assmann puts forward. When it comes to contemporary exponents of the idea of an Axial Age, Assmann focuses exclusively on the discussion among sociologists, historians of religion, and philosophers,
leaving out the equally important debate among evolutionary and moral psychologists and scholars of cognitive science. These include: Nicolas Baumard, Pascal Boyer, Coralie Chevallier, Alexandre Hyafl, Ian Morris (Morris is discussed on pages 213–16, but the book referred to does not appear in the bibliography, nor is Morris examined thoroughly in light of his own argument), or Ara Norenzayan and Peter Turchin (Baumard and Chevallier 2015; Baumard et al. 2015; Baumard, Hyafl and Boyer 2015; Norenzayan 2013; Turchin 2015: 181–211). Ignoring this recent research is unfortunate, since Assmann loses the opportunity to catch up with the current cross-disciplinary debate centred on the notion of an Axial Age affected by elements like increased affluence, enhanced processes of urbanization with a concomitant increase in population density, increased specialization in labour, geographical growth of empires, warfare, etc. Assmann may well be right in his criticism against some recent exponents of the Axial Age theory for elevating what he considers to be a mere philosophical idea to a social fact. In fact, Assmann envisions as the goal of his book the demolition of the essentialized understanding of the Axial Age as a cultural-historical a priori and a scholarly matter of course: “The present book is meant to counteract this belittling of Jaspers’ hypothesis not in order to disprove the thesis, but to uncover anew its wealth of suggestions” (Assman 2018: 10). However, Assmann makes his own argument against such a reification much too simplistic by disregarding the scholars who, in fact, argue for the Axial Age as a historical reality prompted by a number of important socio-material preconditions which exerted influence on each other through intellectual development in the history of religions. I will return to this point at the end of this extended commentary, since other issues are involved in Assmann’s dismissal or ignorance of this whole line of scholarship.

After a short introduction which introduces the key concepts related to the Axial Age, all chapters of Achsenzeit follow the same formula: an intellectual history of most influential individual thinkers, with each individual scholar’s cultural biography scrupulously described. Such methodological choice functions excellently for the subsequent discussion of the distinct takes on the Axial Age by the savants in question. Assmann begins his exploration of the cultural history of the Axial Age concept with the radical French Enlightenment thinker, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805). Anquetil-Duperron stands out because of what he did not do: his thinking is entirely void of any evolutionary progressive and modernizing framework so characteristic of his age. Contrary to so many other thinkers of the epoch and the dominant narrative of the era, Anquetil-Duperron neither set out to present Protestant Christianity as the pinnacle of the history of religions in general, nor did he portray European culture as
the zenith of civilization superior to all other cultures. Anquetil-Duperron was also a scholar of remarkable erudition, for instance completing in 1771 a translation of the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, the Zend-Avesta, which brought this religion under the spotlight of the incipient Axial Age discussion, a point to which I will return. Assmann underscores three crucial aspects in Anquetil-Duperron’s understanding. First, he introduced the idea of “revolution” which does not have political connotations but refers instead to the (slightly opaque) idea of a “natural epochal turn”. However, as Assmann explains, Anquetil-Duperron did not have a specific concept of culture at his disposal, since that only came into being later. Yet, Anquetil-Duperron’s notion of nature allowed him to assert that different “geniuses” emerged simultaneously on different parts of the Earth expressing similar thoughts, and this parallel process implied the idea of a general cultural transition (Assman 2018: 32–33). Anquetil-Duperron points to Zarathustra, Confucius and Pherecydes of Syros (according to some traditions the teacher of Pythagoras) as the most relevant among such parallel thinkers. Second, the French scholar emphasized the 6th century BCE as a “remarkable period of the history of humankind” (“époque considerable dans l’Histoire du genre humain;” [Assman 2018: 34]). Third, in the wake of the then prevalent understanding of Moses as lawgiver par excellence, he accentuated the role of Zarathustra as “législateur”. From these points, Anquetil-Duperron inferred the cultural birth of a cosmopolitical and egalitarian view which implied the equality of all cultures, abolitionism, and a vehement opposition to colonialism (Assman 2018: 36).

The next thinker is Jean-Pierre Abel Rémusat (1788–1832) who became one of the founders of Sinology and juxtaposed in his studies Taoism and Platonism. Rémusat expanded the cultural realm for the subsequent Axial Age discussion by adding Laozi, Pythagoras, Plato, and Israel to the debate (Assman 2018: 50). From Rémusat, Assmann proceeds to Hegel (1770–1831) whose contribution is described in the chapter heading with an anti-Wagnerian twist: “Die Zeit wird zum Raum”, that is, “time becomes space”, alluding to veteran knight Gurnemanz’ portrayal of the disclosure of the Grail in Wagner’s Parsifal. Hegel may well be responsible for the coinage of the Axial Age, since in his Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie (“Lectures on the Philosophy of History”) from 1821 he introduces the concept “Angel der Zeit” (“hinge of time”; Hegel 1986: 386). Curiously, Hegel knew Anquetil-Duperron, but strangely enough he did not refer to him in the context of his idea of Weltgeist (Assman 2018: 110). In any case, the fabled appellation “Achsenzeit” could well be a lapsus memoriae on Jaspers’ part originating from a conflation of his own coinage and Hegel’s notion. At the same time though, Assmann accentuates how Hegel’s construction of
the Geistgeschichte, as quintessential part of his philosophy of history, constitutes an antithesis to later Axial Age theories (Assman 2018: 75). Finally, Assmann emphasizes how Hegel’s concept of *Geist* and cultural historical perspective runs counter to subsequent Axial Age theories which, instead, were to be based on a history of identity (Assman 2018: 75).

The next thinker introduced is Eduard Maximilian Röth (1807–1858) who had already fallen into oblivion during his own lifetime. Röth drew attention to the possible Egyptian influence on Greek philosophy as well as to Greco-Egyptian interactions. In this way, Röth prefigured what has become an important element in current Egyptology: the study of Neoplatonism in conjunction with Egyptian pantheism on the basis of the careful scrutiny of demotic sources. From Röth, Assmann proceeds to examine historian and politician Ernst von Lasaulx (1805–1861) who, as Assmann rightly points out, is the first to develop an “Axial Age” thinking in the footsteps of Anquetil-Duperron. The crucial difference between Lasaulx and Jaspers lies in Jaspers’ presentist accent on the Axial Age as the foundation of the intellectual world of the present (Assman 2018: 118).

Victor von Strauß und Torney (1809–1899) was another 19th-century polymath who, in addition to his studies in law and theology, published on Egyptology and Sinology. Among other things, von Strauß wrote in 1870 a still authoritative and used German translation of the *Taò-tĕ-king*, thereby continuing the work of Rémusat. Similar to Lasaulx, von Strauß saw the 6th century BCE as a “miraculous spiritual movement permeating all people of culture” (“eine wundersame Geistesbewegung”, Assman 2018: 121) which included Israel, Greece, China, India, and Persia. He also pointed to Laozi, Xunzi, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Siddhārtha Gautama as religious reformers who all endorsed a form of axial-age pantheism.

Prior to his discussion of John Stuart Stuart-Glennie (1841–1910), Assmann inserts a short digression on Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), strangely enough the only early scholar of religion and theologian partaking in the discussion of the “Axial Age”. In *Das Gefühl des Überweltlichen. Sensus Numinis* (“The Feeling of the Transcendent”) from 1931, Otto discussed parallels and convergences between religions originating in a form of “Vorreligion” (“pre-religion”). Similar to the previously mentioned intellectuals, Otto highlights the correspondences between Greek philosophy, ancient Israel, China, Persia, and India. Assmann criticizes him, though, for in his listing of parallels and convergences between these religions Otto does not take into account the antagonistic *inter- and intra*-relations like criticism of religion, apostasy, rejection, and persecution which Assmann rightly emphasizes as essential to Axial Age religion (Assman 2018: 140).
Scottish folklorist Stuart-Glennie tackles the idea of the “Axial Age” in the context of his overall concern about the development of moral consciousness as “the ultimate law of history”; Assmann 2018: 143). Since Stuart-Glennie had studied in Bonn, he was most probably acquainted with Lasaulx’s work despite the fact that he does not refer to him (Assmann 2018: 144). Stuart-Glennie divided history into three phases of which the second, the “Axial Age”, lasted from 600 BCE to 1600 (“the great Sixth Century Revolution”; Assmann 2018: 146).

From Stuart-Glennie, Assmann moves to the lesser known brother of Max Weber, national economist and sociologist Alfred Weber (1868–1958) whom Jaspers also credited for his idea of the Axial Age (1949: 17; in his 1946 lecture Jaspers did not mention Weber). Weber spoke about a “merkwürdige Gleichzeitigkeit” (“remarkable simultaneity”) and a “synchronistische Weltzeitalter” (“synchronistic world-age”) in relation to “universally oriented religious and philosophical quest, answers, and decision” that the Graeco-Ancient-Near-Eastern, Indian, and Chinese cultural spheres reached independent of each other (Assman 2018: 153). However, Weber did not elaborate on the point in his 1935 Kulturgeschichte als Kultursociologie (“Cultural history as a cultural sociology”), but in 1943 he returned to the question in Das Tragische und die Geschichte (“Tragedy and history”) in which he divided human cultural history into four epochs of which the third comprises “secondary cultures of the first stage” lasting from 550 BCE to 500 CE, and the fourth designated “secondary cultures of the second stage” beginning around 500 CE and lasting until 1500 CE (Assman 2018: 155).

From Weber, Assmann comes to examine Jaspers (1883–1969) in the most extensive chapter of the book entitled Die Achsenzeit als Gründungsmythos der Moderne (“The Axial Age as founding myth of modernity”; 165-227). Jaspers took up the challenge of his predecessors and developed the idea of the “Axial Age” into a cogent and comprehensive conceptual structure (Assman 2018: 168). Assmann also emphasizes how Jaspers’ concept mirrors an existential philosophical rather than a scientific undertaking (Assmann 2018: 180). Jasper’s idea also reflects Michel de Certeau’s (1925–1986) idea of presentism in that the problems of post-war and post-Shoah Europe are intellectually and tentatively overcome by appealing to a part of history and cultural traditions which have been conferred upon ultimate problem-solving and boundary-defying features which, if retrieved today, could support the creation of a better future (de Certeau 1975: 40). Assmann asserts how: “In this regard, Jaspers’ Axial Age concept is meant to expand the traditional horizon by rewriting the classical canon of ‘humanism’ and the sacred canon of Christian education, heading towards a new global, cosmopolitan humanism. The Axial Age was meant as the classical age for
globalized humanity” (Assman 2018: 281). Assmann shows how Jaspers’ concept of the Axial Age is influenced by the Christian idea of revelation, which also reverberates in Jaspers’ comparable secular term “breakthrough” (“Durchbruch”; Assmann 2018: 182), and how the original concept encompassed nine core characteristics (Assman 2018: 190):

1. Human acknowledgement of being part of a whole
2. A metareflective thinking about thinking
3. A questioning of the existing order
4. A transition from mythos to logos
5. Spiritualization
6. The emergence of philosophy
7. Development of speculative thought on the self and its being
8. Longing for liberation and salvation
9. History as object of reflection

Assmann completes his treatment of Jaspers by discussing three important figures belonging to the history of the reception of Jaspers’ concept. These figures are Lewis Mumford, Ian Morris (see my previous comment), and Jürgen Habermas. The inclusion of Habermas in this context is a little odd. Already in Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns (“The Theory of Communicative Action”, 1981: 262-98, see in particular 273–75) and subsequent works (1992: 158–59; 273–75), Habermas showed interest in the Axial Age issue in his discussion of Max Weber’s thought (see the whole second chapter of the book devoted to Weber’s theory of rationalization), but in some of his latest writings he has resumed the question at length not least due to the inspiration Bellah’s recent works and Michael Tomasello’s research have exerted on his thinking (Habermas 2009; Habermas 2011; Habermas 2012: 104–106). Rumour has it that Habermas is working on a greater work on the same issue in the steps of Bellah, Tomasello, and Canadian neuropsychologist Merlin Donald. Therefore, it would have been, perhaps, better to discuss Habermas’ (2019) take on the Axial Age in the context of Bellah’s recent work on cultural evolution (from the 2005 article and onwards; see below).

The last three thinkers discussed in the remaining chapters are Erich Hermann Wilhelm Vögelin (1901–1985, also known as Eric Voegelin after he became a US citizen in 1944), Shmuel Eisenstadt (1923–2010), and Robert Neelly Bellah (1927–2013). According to Assmann, Vögelin resembles Jaspers insofar as his use of the Axial Age was carried out not to gain a more accurate understanding of the ancient world, but as a springboard to engage the present (Assman 2018: 228). Interestingly, Vögelin embraced Jaspers’ idea of the Axial Age, but he later came to reject it due to his accentuation of Christianity as the crucial turning point in human history. In this way,
Vögelin goes against many previous Axial Age thinkers who had endorsed the Axial Age concept as a mean to overcome religious, cultural, and political particularisms in favour of a pan-culturalist, cosmopolitan egalitarianism (Assman 2018: 243).

In his work on the Axial Age, Shmuel Eisenstadt continued the thinking of Max Weber who, despite having not written any particular work on the Axial Age, circled around the issue (as is perhaps most evident from his famous Zwischenbetrachtung, translated as “Religious rejections of the world and their directions”, 1920/1963). Similar to many contemporary advocates of the idea of the Axial Age, Eisenstadt’s work on the topic is concentrated on achieving an accurate understanding of ancient culture. Like the sinologist Benjamin Schwartz, who has also elaborated on Jaspers’ idea and set up an interdisciplinary research group devoted to researching the same theme (Schwartz 1975), Eisenstadt organized a series of workshops on the topic from 1972 onwards. Contrary to Jaspers, however, he turned the concept into an ideal type in the Weberian sense, but he also extrapolated the aspect of transcendence as the core issue of the Axial Age (Assman 2018: 259). Assmann criticizes both Schwartz and Eisenstadt for dismissing Egypt and Persia from the cultural sphere of the Axial Age religions (Assman 2018: 258). It is difficult, though, to see how Egypt could qualify as an Axial Age religion. Assmann has argued in other works that the short period under Akhenaten during the middle of the 14th century BCE showed features of axiality, especially as regards Akhenaten’s introduction of an exclusive monotheistic solar cult devoted to Aten, but the quick demise of this religious reformation indicates that Egypt at the time lacked the necessary socio-material elements to stabilize the development towards a more permanent Axial Age type of culture. As regards Zoroastrianism, it seems to be perfectly reasonable to add it to the Axial Age religions as it satisfies several of the apparent requirements for inclusion. However, the chronological problems of the available sources are of such moot nature that at the present moment it is better to leave out Zoroastrianism of the Axial Age debate.

In the end, however, Assmann argues that Eisenstadt was neither a universalist, nor an advocate of theories on modernity, and that, additionally, he was too much of an anti-evolutionist to embrace the Axial Age theorem: “When you get ‘Axiality’, ‘axial breakthroughs’, and ‘multiple modernities’ out of the Axial Age, the whole point of the concept disappears, namely the assumption of one single humankind, one human history, and one axis around which everything rotates” (Assman 2018: 264; cf. 180). Ultimately, Assmann argues that one can see in Eisenstadt’s, Schwartz’s, and Bellah’s works a transferral from what linguistically is called thema
to *rhema* (Assman 2018: 258–59). From Anquetil-Duperron to Jaspers, the emphasis in the debate was on figures and shared motifs (*thema*) in order to substantiate how that specific epoch constituted a “remarkable era” (Anquetil-Duperron), a “moral revolution” (Stuart-Glennie), a “synchronistic period” (Alfred Weber), or an “Axial Age” (Jaspers). The accent was put on the *thema*. In contrast to this, Assmann argues, a change occurs with Schwartz and Eisenstadt, with the Axial Age shifting from background and presupposition (*thema*) towards the examination of different and specific manifestations of axiality (*rhema*) (Assman 2018: 258). In other words, a shift semiotically differentiated as *manifestation vs. immanence, or parole vs. langue*. This change in emphasis inaugurates an epistemological “fall”, since the Axial Age theory from its inception has been essentially bound to a universal and modernist frame. In Assmann’s view, this is what the Axial Age concept should continue to be. One has to read the chapter on Bellah to understand this odd reification of the concept.

More than anyone else, Robert N. Bellah is owed great merit for having resuscitated and disseminated the concept of the Axial Age in current scholarship. He was occupied by the theme in the early 1960s and published his first significant work on the issue in 1964. However, he soon came to realize that were he to make a career in the American academy he had to give up this interest, since in the 1960s it was deemed scholarly inappropriate, as it had been ever since the end of World War I, to reflect on issues relating to cultural evolution.10 Things, however, changed, and in the early 1990s Bellah – not least inspired by Merlin Donald – returned to the issue of cultural evolution. Contrary to his previous work, Bellah found in Donald’s neurobiological systemization of a quadruple stage-type of cumulative memory cognition the scientific substantiation for the idea of the Axial Age. Bellah came to see that what Dobzhansky said in terms of biology also pertains to culture: “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense except in the Light of Evolution” (Assman 2018: 1973). Assmann, however, vehemently opposes the attempt to rethink cultural evolution in tandem with biological evolution (Dobzhansky 1973; cf. Assmann 2012: 170), which also explains his total exclusion of Axial Age proponents who frame this period within a gene-culture coevolutionary perspective, but Assmann’s description of the issue reveals him to be rather ignorant of current discussions of biology-culture interactions (e.g. Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman 1981; Boyd and Richerson 1985; Richerson and Boyd 2008; Laland 2017). In fact, he seems to endorse the view that culture is entirely independent of biology and, hence, of natural selection, whereas most contemporary thinkers on the issue emphasize the importance of *biocultural evolution*, thereby, acknowledging that culture is a type of biological evolution (cf. Henrich 2016: 259). Assmann is
unaware of the fact that culture can drive genetic evolution and that “natural selection, acting on genes, has shaped our psychology in a manner that generates nongenetic evolutionary processes capable of producing cultural adaptations” (Henrich 2016: 35). True enough, natural selection is blind and non-teleological, as Assmann emphasizes, whereas culture involves intentionality and deliberateness both at the individual and collective level, but that, most certainly, does not imply a categorical split between culture and nature as Assmann contends (2018: 271; cf. also Assmann’s ruminations on theorizing in the Humanities on pp. 275–76 which I find odd from a philosophy of science perspective). Culture, driving genetic evolution, is in fact a result of natural selection and continues to be so. Culture is not necessarily a matter of genetic evolution, but that does not mean that culture can be detached from biology, which is the reason some of us speak about biocultural rather than cultural evolution. I agree with Assmann that we need to take the existence of other selection mechanisms into consideration when examining culture; but the fact that selection mechanisms other than natural selection are at play in corporate groups consisting of intentional actors as well as in individual agents does not exclude the embeddedness of these selection mechanisms in natural selection (see Turner et al. 2018).

When one reads Assmann’s discussion of Bellah, it is hard to avoid the impression that his previous scepticism toward the Axial Age originates in outright disapproval of Bellah’s take on it: “I see little gain in the comparison between the Israelite prophets, the Chinese philosophers, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and the Indian renouncer Buddha, which Bellah undertakes on the following pages of his essay. Is world rejection really a common denominator?” (Assman 2018: 273).11 On this point, Bellah clearly depends on Weber’s understanding of asceticism as world rejection as developed in his previously mentioned Zwischenbetrachtung, but Assmann does not see this (cf. Petersen 2019b). Distance and rejection toward the ordinary world seem to me a prevalent feature in all these movements and individual figures (see Petersen 2013: 24–28; Petersen 2015: 65–66, 88–89; Petersen 2017: 22–24; Petersen 2010), but such a view could hardly have evolved were it not for a concomitant development in terms of enhanced affluence, increase in urbanization processes, and higher density of populations (cf. Baumard et al. 2015; Turner et al. 2018; Sanderson 2018).

In his final concluding chapter entitled “Die Achsenzeit als normative Vergangenheit einer globalisierten Menschheit” (“The Axial Age as normative past for a globalized humanity”), Assmann concurs with Vögelin that: “It is impossible to attribute to the Axial Age the role of a historical epoch characterized by a common cultural memory as much as Jaspers endorsed this particular understanding with his formulations of ‘humans with whom

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we unto this days live’ and ‘texts we still read’” (Assman 2018: 281, cf. 284–85). I agree; but this assessment also points to the weakness of Assmann’s book. Assmann’s whole focus is directed towards the Rezeptionsgeschichte of Jaspers’ idea of the Axial Age and not towards its Wirkungsgeschichte (even though, oddly enough, it also functions as a retroactive Jaspersian Rezeptionsgeschichte), wherefore he does not acknowledge the very important transition the concept has undergone in recent scholarship (i.e. from Bellah 2005 onwards). Assmann tends to see Bellah’s take on the issue as a misunderstanding of Jaspers which, instead, is reputed indisputably correct, although I would refrain from labelling this as a misinterpretation. Bellah found in Jaspers’ idea more than a kernel of truth which in his late career he came to substantiate by his reliance on Donald’s memory theory. For different reasons Assmann disapproves of this thinking; but one has to acknowledge that Assmann neither discusses it in terms of its own theoretical and methodological framework, nor does he, for the same reason presumably, engage in debate with the current advocates of the Axial Age theory who argue along the same lines of thinking. For Assmann, the Axial Age concept is and remains a presentist philosophical idea: any deviation from this essentialized notion is and remains an egregious blunder resting on a confusion of philosophy with history. This understanding is in my view regrettable, because Assmann thereby precludes himself from taking the discussion into what could be called the fourth stage of the Axial Age debate and, thus, the examination of biocultural evolution in general. However, I also acknowledge that the last phase of the discussion apparently goes against the whole grain of Assmann’s own assumptions which seems to reflect a basic Diltheyan dichotomy between understanding and explanation, between the Humanities and the sciences.

Assmann’s book is excellent in terms of the historical discussion of the older “Axial Age” debate and its different proponents. When it comes to the contemporary discussion, from Bellah (2005) onwards, however, Assmann falters by not understanding or simply dismissing the theoretical and philosophical frame within which the present debate unfolds. Yet, the book is surely an indispensable and pleasurable read for all interested in the intellectual history as well as the research history of the Axial Age discussion from Anquetil-Duperron until the early 2000s. However, as I would like to underscore one final time, one should not expect a warm embrace of the recent debate on the issue or any in-depth analysis of the renewed interest in the Axial Age as a historical phenomenon. Assmann eclipses this discussion and focuses exclusively on the topic as a philosophical legitimization of present concerns which is, ultimately, what Jaspers’ axis of history revolved around.

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Endnotes

1. Anders Klostergaard Petersen is a professor at the Department for the Study of Religion at Aarhus University, Denmark. He has published extensively in the fields of Late Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity, and on methodological and theoretical questions pertaining to the overall study of religion and culture. He is currently involved in projects on biocultural evolution with a special focus on the history of religion.

2. In original, “Diesem Absinken der Jaspers’schen Hypothese will dieses Buch entgegenwirken, nicht um die These zu widerlegen, sondern um sie in ihrem Anregungsreichum wieder freizulegen.” Unless stated otherwise, translations are my own.

3. Cf. Jaspers’ poignant reference to Hegel in the context of the term “axis” in Jaspers 1949: 19: “Thus, still Hegel said: All history moves toward Christ and proceeds from him; the appearance of the Son of God is the axis of world history. Our calendar is daily testimony to this Christian structure of world history.”

4. Inverted commas are herein used to signal the use of the term Axial Age as a general theme prior to Jaspers’ formalization and naming of the category.

5. In his previous scholarship, Assmann emphasized this aspect as quintessential to monotheistic religions, but now he, correctly in my view (see Turner et al. 2018: 215), points to this as a general Axial Age feature (cf. Assmann 2003).


7. I use the term here since it is the label under which Assmann discusses the theme. In other works, however, I have argued that in order to enhance the value of the concept for cross-cultural studies another definition is necessary. Additionally, I think that the idealism which affects the notion is rather detrimental to its implementation, because it ignores the socio-material aspect that, in terms of causation and in my view, is the most significant element for a new type of culture. Hence, I have suggested to use the alternate term kosmos religion and to divide the history of religion as a whole into the following stages: (1) gatherer-hunters’ religion (rethinking and re-adapting the chronological sequence of the traditional concept of hunter-gatherer religions); (2) complex gatherer-hunters’ religion; (3) early urban religion; (4) complex urban religion; (5) early kosmos religion; (6) complex kosmos religion; (7) early global religion; 8) complex global religion (see Petersen 2019a; Petersen 2019b).

8. I have had the opportunity to discuss the matter a few times with Michael Stausberg whose assessment I rely on in this regard.


10. Personal conversation with Bellah with whom I was in contact in connection with a grand conference I organized in 2012 on Biological and Cultural Evolution and Their Interactions: Rethinking the Durkheimian and Darwinian Legacy in the Context of the Study of Religion for the centennial of Durkheim’s Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Bellah’s health was too fragile at the time to travel to Denmark, but on 26 June 2012 he gave a video keynote address on the topic of the Axial Age.


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