The Axial Age

In his 1949 book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel des Geschichte* (translated in 1953 as *The Origin and Goal of History*), Karl Jaspers proposed that the millennium before the time of Christ (or more specifically 800-200 BCE) could be considered an *Achsenzeit* or "Axial Age." During this period, in five isolated regions of the world (China, India, Persia, Israel/Palestine, and Greece), human society and thought changed radically and irreversibly. A world that had until then been understood in terms of legends (*mythos*) was now examined in the light of reason (*logos*). During this time, "hitherto unconsciously accepted ideas, customs and conditions were subjected to examination, questioned and liquidated." A multiplicity of gods and demons ceded their power to one universal god or life force. Sages, prophets and philosophers proposed rules for how we should behave. Though the axial age passed long ago, we still return to these teachings for moral guidance.

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969)

Jaspers trained in medicine and spent his early years as a psychiatrist. Due to his chronic lung disease, he found the demands of the clinic exhausting, and switched his interest to psychology and philosophy. Since he was married to a Jew, he lost his teaching position at Heidelberg University in 1937, and barely survived World War II without being arrested. After the war he moved to Basel, Switzerland, and presented an influential set of lectures on *The Question of German Guilt* in 1947.

Though he disliked the term, Jaspers became one of the existentialists. Confronted with the reality of a world that is beyond our powers of understanding, we have no recourse but to proclaim our own existence and connect with that which transcends reality. The following two quotations (via Walraff, 1970) from Jaspers' *Philosophie*, originally published in 1932, are noteworthy since they foreshadow his later thinking on the Axial Age:

> *Every limit encountered by scientific investigation provides an opportunity to transcend. There are two kinds of limits. On the negative side appears the irrationality of the*

> *incalculable—the unintelligibility manifested by physical "constants," atomic movements, and the so-called contingency of natural laws. On this side we are confronted by matter—the other that is not permeated by Logos. On the positive side it is freedom that appears as a limit. The sort of independently existing being that, because of its resistance, physical science could determine, though only negatively [as an unknown and unknowable thing-in-itself], now is assuredly present. The natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) undertake to capture the cognitively impenetrable with their laws and theories; the humanistic disciplines (Geisteswissenschaften) submit the results and appearances of freedom to interpretation in terms of their own laws, norms, and meanings. But the final boundary is, for the natural sciences, the dark absolutely other, and for the humanistic disciplines the freedom of Existenz as a source of communication. This latter leads me to myself.*
>
> *If everything that cognitive orientation yields in the form of universally and necessarily valid knowledge is to be called "world," then the question arises as to whether being extends beyond the world, and thought beyond orientation within the world. The soul and God—or Existenz and Transcendence as we say when we exchange the language of mythology for that of philosophy—lie outside of the world. We cannot know them in the sense in which we know things within the world. . . . Although they are not known, they are not nothing, and while they are not accessible to science they can still be thought of.*

The Origin and Goal of History (1949/1953)

Jasper devoted the first section of his book on history to the *Achsenzeit* or Axial Age (which was also considered in a brief paper for *Commentary* in 1948). The German word *Achse* can mean "axis" (a reference line about which a vector can rotate, or

which serves as a basis for measurement), “axle” (about which wheels rotate), or “pivot” (a point about which something turns). Jasper was likely using all of these meanings, though the idea of the pivot seems most salient.

> *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 most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity (p 1)*

The Axial Age gave birth both to our modern rational way of thinking and to the major world religions:

> *What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence. (p 2)*

In comparison Pre-Axial cultures appear unawakened – “as though man had not really come of himself” (p 7). Mythical narratives that were part of the pre-axial culture were sometimes maintained, but these were interpreted as parables rather than as fact.

Jaspers identified five cultures as participating in the Axial Age: China with the teachings of Confucius and Lao Tze, India with the Upanishads and the Buddha, Iran/Persia with Zoroaster/Zarathustra, Israel/Palestine with the prophets Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Greece with their philosophers and tragedians. These regions developed the new Axial way of thinking synchronously and independently. The changes likely resulted from the fact that these societies were in a state of war and turmoil, and people were avidly

seeking respite from the chaos (pp 17-18).

According to Jaspers the importance of the Axial Age (pp18-20) was that

a) it was related to humanity in general rather than to specific groups:

> *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, linking one's own consciousness to the alien consciousness (p 19)*

b) it promoted communication and discussion, with an acknowledgement that no one has an exclusive grasp of the truth.

c) it was pre-eminent in its creativity – the writings of the sages of this period have become a yardstick against which all later creations are measured:

> *Until today 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. (p 7)*

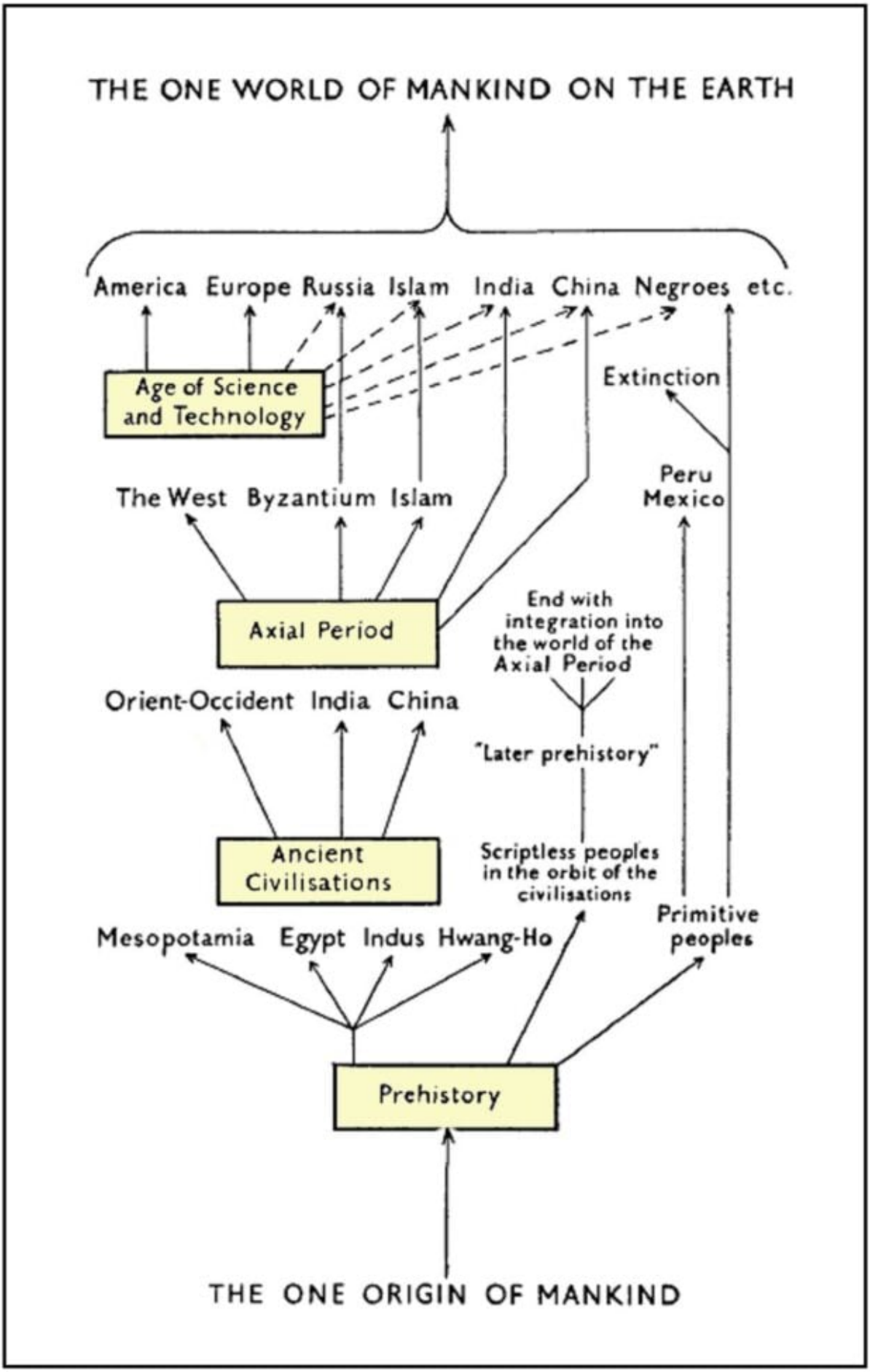
The Axial Age was essential to Jaspers' schema of human history (pp 24-26) which proposed with three main stages in human development:

(i) the foundation of the major ancient civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Northern India (valley of the Indus River) and Northern China (valley of the Huang-Ho/YellowRiver)

(ii) the Axial Age in five particular regions (China, India, Persia, Palestine, Greece) wherein civilization was allowed to grow spiritually

(iii) the age of science and technology initiated and

developed in the West (Europe and North America) and then transferred (dashed lines) to other regions of the globe


THE ONE WORLD OF MANKIND ON THE EARTH
America Europe Russia Islam India China Negroes etc.
Age of Science and Technology
Extinction
The West Byzantium Islam
Peru Mexico
Axial Period
End with integration into the world of the Axial Period
Orient-Occident India China
"Later prehistory"
Ancient Civilisations
Scriptless peoples in the orbit of the civilisations
Primitive peoples
Mesopotamia Egypt Indus Hwang-Ho
Prehistory
THE ONE ORIGIN OF MANKIND

Jaspers' thinking about the Axial Age was far from precise, and has been criticized extensively (see Mullins et al, 2018). His characterization of Axial thinking appears more of a post hoc description of the cultures that he chose to include in his survey than any defining criteria for Axiality.

It is unclear why the cultures of Egypt under Akhenaten (14th Century BCE), or of Mesopotamia in the time of Hammurabi (18th Century BCE) were not considered Axial. Perhaps these cultures were too transient to be considered Axial. However, as Jaspers points out, the cultures that he included in his Axial Age also did not last.

Among the cultures that he does include, some definitely predate his Axial Period. Although the life of Zarathustra is impossible to date, his teachings appear to come from the Second Millennium BCE (Boyce, 1984; Rose, 2011). Jewish thought may have been formally written down during the Axial period but its basic ideas originated before the time of Solomon (10th Century BCE).

Although Jaspers stresses the importance of the 1st Millennium BCE to the origin of the major world religions, Christianity and Islam – the two religions with the most adherents in the modern world – began after the Axial Period. The interpretation that

> *Christianity and Islam fall outside the axial age chronologically, but are historically intelligible only as developments of Israel's axial breakthrough (Bellah, 2072)*

inappropriately discounts their clear origins in the 1st and 7th Centuries CE.

Nevertheless, Jaspers' concept of an Axial Age was enthusiastically taken up by many scholars of religion

(Armstrong, 2004, 2005, 2006; Bellah, 2005, 2011; Eisenstadt, 1986; Schwartz, 1975). The period has been given several other names: the Moral Revolution (Halton, 2014); the Great Transformation (Armstrong, 2006); the Age of Transcendence (Schwartz, 1975), and the theoretic age (Donald, 1991).

Extension of the Idea of Axiality

Each of those who followed Jasper fleshed out the description of the Axial Age to include some defining features:

a) the formulation of an ethical rather than coercive morality. People should do what is right and not what those in power demand. Leaders may be necessary but their powers must not be absolute. Every person should have equal opportunities for success in life.

b) the idea of a "moralizing god," a supreme force who (or which) requires human beings to live a good life, rewards virtuous behavior, punishes the sinful (typically in an afterlife), and always knows when laws are being transgressed.

c) the replacement of the ritual of animal (or human) sacrifice by the life of religious devotion. The divine does not require the sacrifice of animals but rather the dedication of a believer's life to compassion and service.

d) the creation of concepts not immediately related to the external world. The Axial Age addressed questions such as what happens after death and whether the world was exactly how it appears. As Schwartz (1975) stated this "transcendent" type of thinking was "a kind of standing back and looking beyond – a kind of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond."

e) the use of external memory devices such as written records (Donald, 1991). This allowed culture and technology to be transmitted from one generation to another without the need for their continual rediscovery.

Seshat History of the Axial Age (2019)

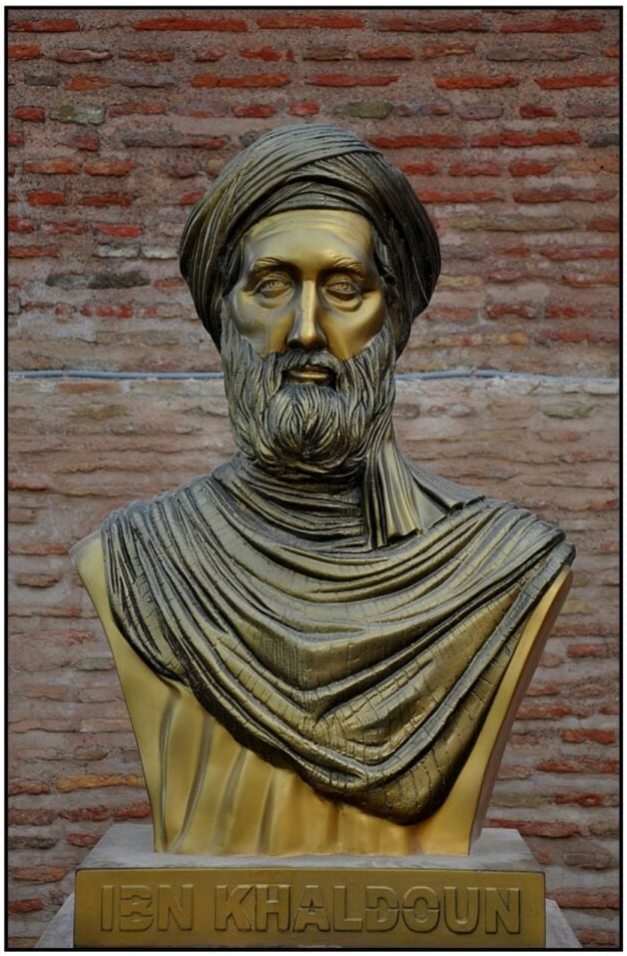
The Seshat (Turchin, 2015) is a data bank of global history, founded in 2011 and used by many different investigators to examine questions about human cultural evolution, economic development and sociological change. These studies support the new field of “cliodynamics” – the science of historical change – a term deriving from the Greek Goddess of History. The data bank itself is named after Seshat, the Egyptian Goddess of Wisdom and Knowledge. Seshat is usually depicted holding a palm stem on which she notches the passage of time. She wears a leopard skin, the pattern of which denotes the stars and eternity. Above her head is a seven-pointed emblem, the meaning of which is not known, but may signify enlightenment.

In 2019, Hoyer and Reddish edited the results of a *Seshat History of the Axial Age*. The study looked at societies in

multiple regions of the world and at multiple times in order to determine when the characteristics of the Axial Age became apparent. Because it is relatively easy to document, the study focussed on the origins of defined moral principles, such as the definition of moral norms often in terms of a legal code, the setting of punishments for the violation of moral rules, the conceptualization of an omniscient and omnipotent supernatural force or being that required obedience to the law, and constraints on the power of social leaders. The study confirmed that these principles began during the 1st millennium BCE in the regions named in Jaspers' book. However, the principles also became evident in other regions at other times.

The conclusion was therefore that axiality was not an age but rather a "stage" in the evolution of a complex society:

> *the initial rise of archaic states led to the distortion and repression of at least some components of natural morality and that axiality provided a way of restoring those principles, and especially their cohesion-building effects, under the guise of a more benevolent regime of supernatural enforcement in ways that applied equally to rich and poor, the powerful and the meek. Such a restoration, we have argued, was necessary for political systems to evolve beyond the megasociety threshold. (pp 406-7)*



Turchin (2018) has proposed that as states or empires reach a particular size (in terms of population) and level of complexity (in terms of the different factions within that population) dissension arises between those who lead the state and those who are its subjects. The state may then fail, either through external forces taking advantage of the internal divisions in the state, or through the rebellion of its constituent parts. Developing a sense of “group feeling” or “collective solidarity” can prevent the internal dissension and help fight against external forces. This group felling was present in early small bands of human beings, but needed to be reinstated when the groups became larger and more susceptible to despotic rule. Turchin names this solidarity *asabiya* – a word used by the Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) in his studies of the peoples of the Maghreb (Northern Africa). A bust of Ibn Khaldun on the right is located at the Casbah of Bejaia in Algeria.

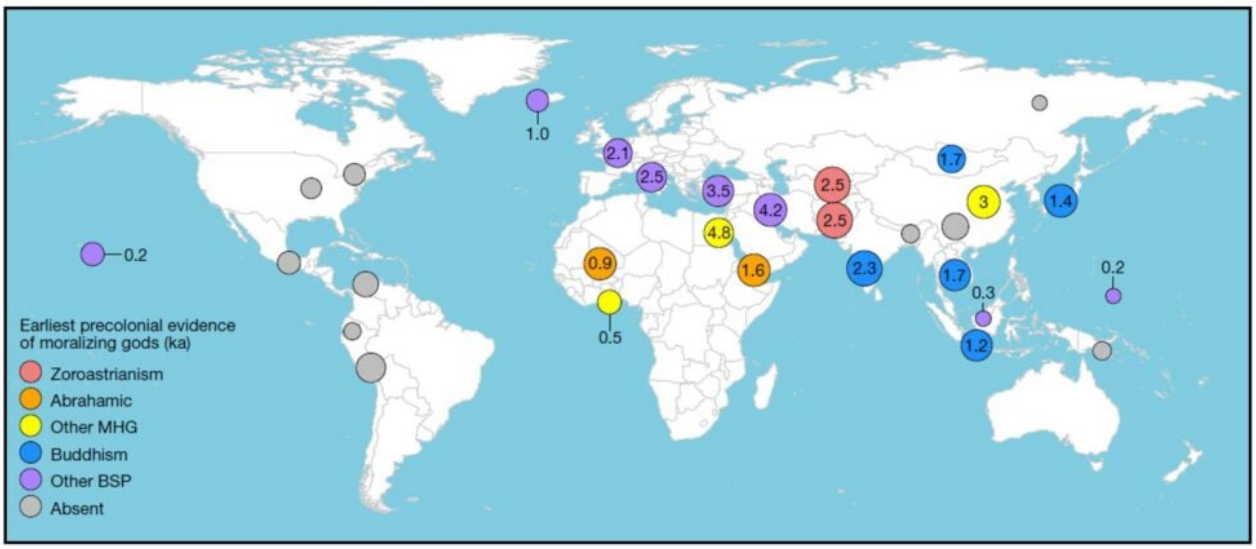
The Seshat data bank has allowed scholars to relate the rise of such moral principles as “moralizing high gods” and “broad supernatural punishment” (heaven and hell) to the level of social complexity, as measured using the principal component of an analysis of 51 measurements of government levels, infrastructure, written records, religious texts, financial instruments, etc. Whitehouse et al. (2019) examined 30 different regions of the world and found that these moral principles only occurred after a significant increase in social complexity.

> *powerful moralizing ‘big gods’ and prosocial supernatural punishment tend to appear only after the emergence of ‘megasocieties’ with populations of more than around one million people. Moralizing gods are not a prerequisite for the evolution of social complexity, but they may help to sustain and expand complex multi-ethnic empires after they have become established.*

The authors therefore suggest that

> *if moralizing gods do not cause the evolution of complex societies, they may represent a cultural adaptation that is necessary to maintain cooperation in such societies once they have exceeded a certain size, perhaps owing to the need to subject diverse populations in multi-ethnic empires to a common higher-level power.*

A map of the 30 different regions that they evaluated shows that the first occurrence of moralizing high gods (MHG) was in ancient Egypt when the idea of *maat* – universal justice – was first proposed 4.8 ka (thousand years before the present). The size of the circles represents the relative complexity of the society in that region.



Jaspers' axial societies are represented by Confucianism in Northern China 3 ka, Zoroastrianism in Persia 2.5 ka and Buddhism in India 2.3 ka. This particular Seshat survey did not include Jaspers' other two axial regions – Greece and Palestine. Although Christianity was and is one of the great religions with a moralizing high God and broad supernatural punishment (BSP), regions of Europe (early Rome and Celtic France) developed such ideas prior to their actual conversion to Christianity. Although large societies developed in the Americas, these were not characterized by moralizing high gods and this (in addition to their technological inferiority) may have rendered them susceptible to colonization by the Christian countries.

Conclusion

Modern religions are characterized by a moral code that promotes the social virtues of compassion and temperance and a concept of justice administered either by an omnipotent deity or by a universal force. These religions originated when societies became sufficiently complex that they needed their citizens to feel solidarity with each other. A sense of morality was a tool for survival when humans lived in small groups. Codified and intensified by the sages and prophets of more complex societies, morality then became the glue that held together empires. Several of our modern religions

originated in the 1st Millennium BCE in what Jaspers described as the Axial Age. However, others originated at other times and we must consider axiality as a stage in the development of any human society rather than as a particular age

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