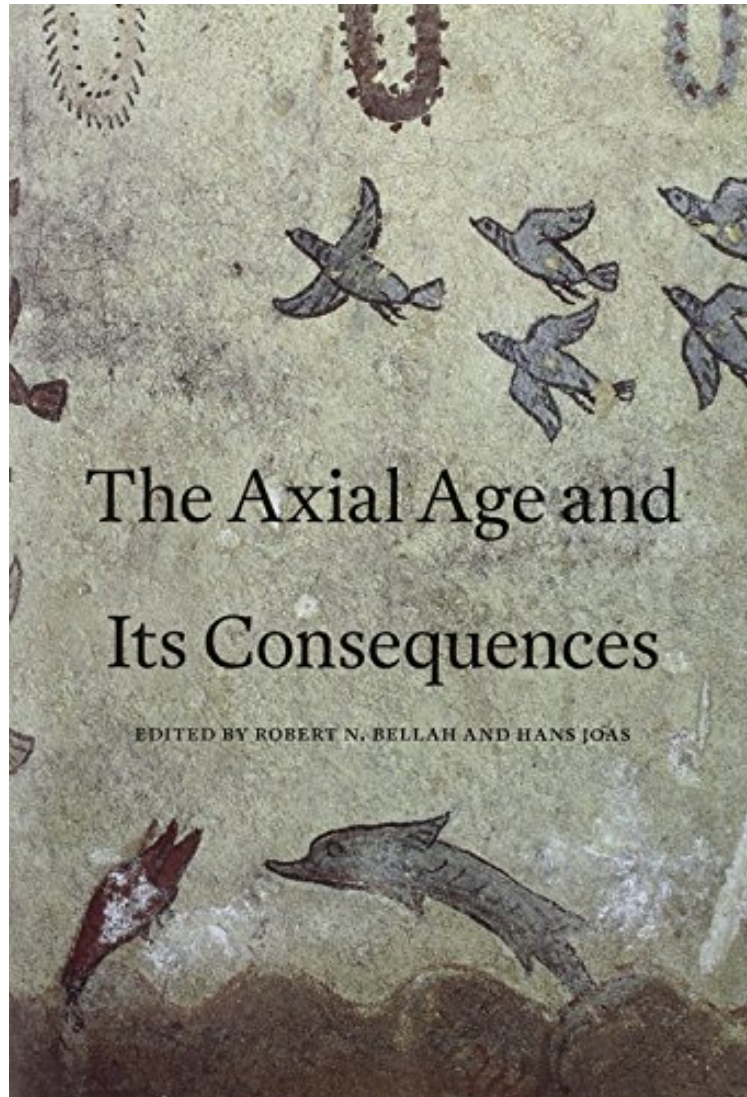


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The Axial Age and Its Consequences

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From Brand: Belknap Press : The Axial Age and Its Consequences before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Axial Age and Its Consequences:

46 of 47 people found the following review helpful. A major historical problem reexamined By Wayne Dynes The Axial Age is an era centered on the period around 500 BCE, when a remarkable body of revolutionary achievements in thought erupted across a broad band of Eurasia. In Greece, there were the pre-Socratic philosophers, followed by Socrates himself, Plato, and Aristotle. About the same time, if the traditional chronology is to be trusted, such reforming prophets as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah arose in ancient Israel. In India Gautama Buddha appeared,

accompanied by the maturation of Hindu thought found in the Upanishads. In ancient China, Confucius, Mencius, and the author of the Daodejing illuminated the Far Eastern manifestation of the Axial Age. There was thus, it seems, a remarkable synchronicity of epochal advances stretching from southeastern Europe to the plains of northern China. The period not only saw the appearance of major thinkers and their writings, but a new criticality that was prepared to examine, and if necessary to discard the conventional wisdom. In most cases this development occurred in small cities and city states. Subsequently, the rise of empires, such as the Hellenistic kingdoms, the regime of Ashoka, and the Han Dynasty served to blunt the effect of the Axial Revolution. Yet it may be argued that this barrage of innovation, occurring some 2500 years ago, was the breakthrough to the modernity in which we still live. Sixty-three years ago the concept of the Axial Age rose to prominence thanks to a remarkable book, *The Origin and Goal of History*, by the philosopher Karl Jaspers. Subsequent research has traced the concept back to the writings of A.-H. Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805), a French scholar of ancient Iran. With regard to Jaspers, it is easy to see why this grand concept would appeal to a Europe that was just recovering from the nihilism of Nazism. Over time, though, interest faded, to revive recently, thanks in large measure to the efforts of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt. The new interest seems to be fueled by a broader process, that of globalization, which in the view of some observers is fostering a new Axial Age. The problem has now been addressed by the present weighty volume combining the efforts of eighteen distinguished authorities. There is much to ponder in this book, so my conclusions must be regarded as tentative. The key problem is this: What can account for this extraordinary synchronization of breakthroughs? After all, in those remote times there was very little communication among the ancient civilizations involved. Merlin Donald, an academic psychologist represented in the book, has proposed an answer in terms of cultural evolution. He believes that, beginning in prehistoric times, humanity advanced through several distinct phases: the episodic, which yielded to the mimetic, and that in turn to the mythic. The theoretic stage, corresponding to the Axial Age, concluded the sequence. In what is perhaps the most penetrating of all the essays in this book, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann returns a mixed verdict. "I confess that I cannot bring myself to really believe in the "Axial Age" as a global turn in universal history occurring *grosso modo* in the middle of the first millennium BCE. On the other hand, I find the concept of axiality (with pre- and post-axiality) a valuable and even indispensable analytic tool in the comparative study of cultures. . . . [The] 'breakthroughs' occurred at different times and to different degrees under different conditions and with different consequences." In short the thesis remains tantalizing, but not yet fully secured.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Essential reading for anyone interested in the intellectual history of the ancient world

By Fu Xi This is a thick anthology with multiple views concerning Karl Jaspers's concept of the Axial Age, the period around 500 BCE in which philosophy blossomed as the result of the teachings and writings of such seminal figures as Socrates, Shakyamuni Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi. This was a transformation of consciousness unique in human history. Anyone studying early development of human thought needs to be familiar with this concept. It has been controversial, with the valid criticism that similar changes have occurred in other cultures in later eras. This book will give a very full understanding of the Axial Age concept and associated contentions. My only carps are that it is repetitious, even by the standards of multi-authored volumes. More important, some discussions seem to be quibbles on ideological issues, rather than substantive. It is also hyper abstract in the Continental tradition. I would have preferred more details on the context of Axiality, that is what these seminal figures taught and where they agreed or disagreed. Also more details on pre-Axial thought. These criticisms aside, this is worth the attention of all with serious interest in intellectual history.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A good survey of discussion on the topic

By Roger P. Neyman This book has a lot of value in it, enough that I have to give it a four star rating. But it is a very big tent, and one that admits too many to the party. Wandering through this crowd you'll encounter more than one camel that has nosed its way all the way in. :-)

Probably if you're considering buying or reading this book, you already think you have some interest in the idea of the axial age, so you may not like what I think is one of the book's great strengths: that it has essays critical of the idea, and hence critical for the basis of the collection included. That's the good part of this being a very big tent. The downside is that there are two or three essays that I think border on post-modernist mumble-bluster. Their content could have been reduced to a few short paragraphs of marginal value. In the end, I emerged from reading this book with the impression that it would be better (in my own work) to put more emphasis on the 'Axial' rather than on the 'Age', meaning that the claimed concurrency of events is less convincing to me than the claim of common themes. I was less convinced by those who argued that the particulars overwhelm the commonalities. What is difficult to discuss (and this book doesn't really focus on the question) is that there is one species launching into all of these diverse experiments and, in the 21st Century we are headed into an emergent global culture. The essay that comes closest deals with evolutionary basis for discussing the idea of the Axial Age. In short, you're bound to find something worthwhile here. I don't know if owning the book is crucial for you, so you might want to peruse it in a library to decide if you want to keep it around for reference first.

The first classics in human history—the early works of literature, philosophy, and theology to which we have returned throughout the ages—appeared in the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE. The canonical texts of the Hebrew scriptures, the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle, the Analects of Confucius and the Daodejing, the

Bhagavad Gita and the teachings of the Buddha all of these works came down to us from the compressed period of history that Karl Jaspers memorably named the Axial Age. In *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Robert Bellah and Hans Joas make the bold claim that intellectual sophistication itself was born worldwide during this critical time. Across Eurasia, a new self-reflective attitude toward human existence emerged, and with it an awakening to the concept of transcendence. From Axial Age thinkers we inherited a sense of the world as a place not just to experience but to investigate, envision, and alter through human thought and action. Bellah and Joas have assembled diverse scholars to guide us through this astonishing efflorescence of religious and philosophical creativity. As they explore the varieties of theorizing that arose during the period, they consider how these in turn led to utopian visions that brought with them the possibility of both societal reform and repression. The roots of our continuing discourse on religion, secularization, inequality, education, and the environment all lie in Axial Age developments. Understanding this transitional era, the authors contend, is not just an academic project but a humanistic endeavor.

With eighteen leading multidisciplinary scholars, this volume covers enormous ground in the transformative beginnings for civilizations that shared cultural origins in the mid-first millennium BC in Europe and Asia. Extending the insight of existential philosopher Karl Jaspers regarding the 'Axial Age' and its later evolution to 'multiple modernities,' *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, superbly edited by Hans Joas and Robert Bellah, is a must-read for contemporary comparative-historical sociological analyses in our own global age. (Edward A. Tiryakian, author of *For Durkheim: Essays in Historical and Cultural Sociology*) The Axial Age, the epic moment around the 6th century BCE which saw the intellectual outburst that engendered the major world religions, has enjoyed an upsurge of scholarly attention in the past generation. Great themes demand great voices, and editors Bellah and Joas have assembled a remarkable choral ensemble for a score organized to address fundamental questions about Axiality and its comparative manifestations, destructive possibilities, current status, and implications for the future. I can think of no compendium in the past generation that measures up to the quality and significance of this volume. (Donald Levine, University of Chicago) Highly recommended for readers of Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* and students of religious philosophy and evolutionary sociology. (Brian Odom Library Journal 2012-09-15) About the Author Robert N. Bellah was Elliott Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, at the University of California, Berkeley. Hans Joas is Permanent Fellow at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies and Professor of Sociology and Social Thought at the University of Chicago.