The “Axial Age” vs. Weber’s Comparative Sociology of the World Religions

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Recent developments in the field of economic history raise profound problems for what has long been known as “the Weber thesis” or the “Protestant ethic thesis.” Commencing with the work of Kenneth Pomeranz in his landmark 2000 book, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, the view has increasingly prevailed that, contrary to earlier accounts, Europe only surged ahead of the rest of the world economically around the beginning of the nineteenth century. This view has subsequently been endorsed, if on different grounds, by such authors as the ancient historian Ian Morris (2010) and the economist Angus Deaton (2013). For his part, Michael Mann (1986: 377) has argued that the crucial developments underlying modern European hegemony – in particular, the “normative pacification” provided by medieval Catholicism, which lowered transaction costs among the inhabitants of the West European peninsula – were in place centuries before the Protestant Reformation. These analyses call sharply into question whether “the Protestant ethic thesis” – the idea that it was Protestantism, and especially Calvinism, that bolstered the “spirit of capitalism” – can be seriously invoked as an explanation for Europe’s rise to dominance of the modern world.

Max Weber’s entire comparative sociology of the world religions was based precisely on this notion, however. Weber’s studies of the religions of China, India, and ancient Palestine were oriented toward illuminating their “economic ethics” – the ways, in other words, in which their doctrines did or did not conduce to birthing “modern rational capitalism,” as Weber identified the new economic order. Defining the explanandum in these terms was testimony to Weber’s preoccupation with questions raised about the modern world by Karl Marx; it is not too much to say that most of Weber’s scholarly efforts were in some sense a response to Marx’s historical materialism. But this understandable preoccupation on Weber’s part may have distracted us from a more solid, more defensible core of his writings on religion. Against this background, we may need to re-think fundamentally our “reception” of Weber’s *oeuvre*, de-emphasizing his analysis of the causes of the rise of
capitalism and focusing instead on the tools with which he has supplied us for the purpose of social analysis generally. Here the debate on the Axial Age helps clarify Weber’s understanding of social analysis as against that of his heirs who defend the Axial Age thesis, which posits a kind of uniformity in the responses of several of the cultures of the ancient world to comparable problems of human development. In order to unpack this argument, let me begin with an explication of the Axial Age thesis.

The Idea of an Axial Age

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1953: 1) proposed the idea that the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE constituted an “axial age,” during which “man as we know him today came into existence.” Jaspers argued that the world’s major civilizations – those of the Eurasian ecumene – faced comparable developmental challenges that led to a series of major breakthroughs in human thought. In particular, the Chinese, Indians, Greeks, and the Jews of Israel are said to have developed theoria – “thinking about thinking,” “criticism,” and similar advances in thinking about the world in which they lived. Commentators ascribed to the period the development variously of the notion of “transcendence” (of this world by another world) (Eisenstadt 1982) or of the very possibility of “religious rejections of the world” on the basis of “the exaltation of another realm of reality as alone true and valuable” (Bellah 1964: 359). These developments were embodied above all in the emergence of Confucianism, Buddhism, prophetic Judaism, and classical Greek antiquity. Somewhat awkwardly, and despite the prevalence of a lively pantheon of gods in the Greek world, the latter had relatively little to do with religion as we normally think of it, but rather was a case of humans taking their destiny into their own hands in an unprecedented manner. And there has of course been an extended debate about whether or not Confucianism counts as “religion” or is simply a set of practical and ethical precepts.

Nonetheless, Jaspers and those who have followed his lead have tended to emphasize the coherence of this epoch as a stage in the development of human ratiocination. This view has been criticized by some historians who see it as an unwarranted intrusion of philosophers and theologians into the domain of the historian. One example of this critique comes from the pen of the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, who has written that “[t]he idea of the Axial Age is not so much about ‘man as we know him’ [today] and his/her first appearance
in time, but about ‘man as we want him’ and the utopian goal of a universal civilized community” (Assmann 2012, p. 401). But this skeptical rejection has not necessarily been the view among historians across the board. For example, the axial age thesis had an early defender in the renowned historian of Islam Marshall Hodgson (1963: 244), who wrote of the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE that “Jaspers has with reason called this the ‘Axial Age’,” a period which “resulted in the presence everywhere [in Eurasia] of selective intellectual standards which permitted intercultural influences to proceed on the level of abstract thought.”

Another problem with the notion that “man as we know him today came into existence” during the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE is that this periodization excludes both Christianity and Islam. This seems perverse, leaving out the two religions which, in the contemporary world, happen to be the fastest-growing faiths on the face of the earth. The historian Ian Morris, another defender of the axial age thesis, sees Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism (which he believes extended the possibility of salvation from the narrow religious elite recognized by Theravada Buddhism to all humankind) as “second-wave” axial developments that offered “new kinds of salvation to more people than their first-wave predecessors and [made] the path toward salvation easier” (Morris 2010: 324). Morris also regards Islam as part of this second wave of axial thinking, accepting Muhammad’s conception of himself as redeeming the unfulfilled promise of his predecessors in the “Abrahamic” tradition and arguing that the Arab invaders “came not to bury the West but to perfect it” (Morris 2010: 353). But Morris’s framework for “axial” developments bursts the temporal propinquity that had served so well as the foundation of the claim about a “universal civilized humanity.” Some might say that Christianity and Islam were simply feeding off of cultural resources that had been supplied earlier by prophetic Judaism and by Hellenism, but it is hardly as if Christianity and Islam are unquestioning allies in all contexts around the globe; there are real differences between them that lead to periodic claims that the others are “infidels” (see, e.g., Wheatcroft 2003). Even if it may be true that, down deep, “all religions are cousins” (Bellah 2007), the specific doctrines and forms they have taken have led people to kill one another over them. More importantly for the present discussion, they have led to different kinds of outlooks on the world and shaped different kinds of behavior. It is to those differences that Weber’s attention was chiefly directed. We now turn to his approach to understanding the religions of the Axial Age and after.
Weber’s Comparative Sociology of the World Religions

In his magnum opus, *Economy and Society* (1978: 447), Max Weber remarks on the importance of a “prophetic age” during the period singled out by Jaspers, but refers in quotation marks to the “prophets” of ancient Greece in recognition of the fact that these were not religious thinkers in the mold of the Jewish prophets, Zoroaster, the Hindu sages, or the Buddha. Nor does Weber place much stress on the particular period in which these developments occurred; he indicates that the “prophetic age” took place mainly in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, but that some of these prophetic movements “reached into the sixth and even the fifth century” (Weber 1978: 442). On the basis of these contributions, Bellah (2005: 75–76) suggests that Max Weber’s comparative sociology of the world religions “implies something like the axial age hypothesis.” Bellah is surely correct about this. Yet Weber was more inclined to emphasize the variation in the “directions” of the “world rejection” that emerged in this “prophetic age” than their commonality. In Weber’s view, the crucial dimension of these developments was not so much temporal as geographic and cultural. Immediately after this discussion of the prophetic age, Weber highlights a crucial distinction between two forms of prophecy: the East and South Asian forms of prophecy, for which the Buddha set the standard, were “exemplary,” whereas those originating in the Near East and typified by Zoroaster and Muhammad were “ethical” in character. The differences between these two basic types of prophecy, according to Weber, set these world regions on divergent paths that would lead to profoundly different religio-cultural trajectories – and, of course, divergent economic and social outcomes.

But then, beyond the ethical/exemplary distinction, there were also significant differences in emphasis and outlook among the various religions that emerged across the Eurasian landmass over the past three millennia as well. Let us begin with India. In order to make sense of the appearance of the world religions in India, we have to go way back in time to the phenomena against which those later religions were reacting. The so-called Aryan invaders who entered India from the northwest in roughly the middle of the second millennium BCE were nature-worshippers. That archaic form of religion would, in time, be superseded by Vedic Brahmanism – a priestly religion associated with “books of knowledge” ([*vedas*]) that were also poems addressed to the gods seeking their approbation and assistance. The priestly stratum inherited from the ancient poets the responsibility for purveying, whether by writing or in speech, the sacred hymns and mantras, which were regarded as powerful magic and accessible only to the religiously qualified.
The canonical text of Brahmanism, but also of later Hinduism, was the Rig Veda, which is thought to have been composed well before 1000 BCE, but not written down before about 600 BCE. Like the Koran, the Rig Veda was thought to have been divinely revealed poetry and was followed up by prose commentaries that elaborated the rules and rituals of the faith. Because they marked out a special role for the Aryan priestly class, the commentaries were referred to as the Brahmanas. Vedic religion was organized to a high degree by sacrifice, and, as in Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion of ancient Persia, sacrifice was unfailingly accompanied by fire. Indeed, the god of fire, Agni, was the most frequently mentioned god in the Rig Veda. The third most important, after the world-destroying Indra, was soma, an elixir associated with immortality and with an annual ritual involving the construction of an elaborate altar at which sacrifices were made. Aryan households were expected to offer sacrifices to the gods five times daily, either by the Brahman head of household or by his Brahman priest or cook, from whom anyone would take food because of his high, non-polluting status (Wolpert 2000: 43). As guardians of and go-betweens with the spiritual world, the Brahman priests had come by the middle of the first millennium BCE to occupy positions of earthly power as well as of religious authority.

In its search for an explanation of the cosmos, book ten of the Rig Veda outlines a social hierarchy that sprang from the anatomy of the original cosmic man: the brahmans, or priests, came from his mouth; the kshatriyas, the warriors, from his arms; the vaishyas, the merchants, artisans, and farmers, from his legs; and the shudras, the servants, from his feet. The shudras were probably originally the indigenous people conquered by the lighter-skinned Aryans from west Asia, and the emergence of this category to supplement the three-class order familiar from European society (those who pray, those who fight, and those who work) helped institute a profound color-consciousness which ever since has been “a significant factor in reinforcing the hierarchical social attitudes that are so deeply embedded in Indian civilization” (Wolpert 2000: 32). These social arrangements, which the Portuguese would much later mistakenly designate a “caste” system but better designated by the term varna, would of course characterize Indian society until very recent times.

When in the middle of the first millennium the Magadha dynasty came to dominate a substantial portion of the Ganges plain, the Brahmans had come, along with the warrior class (kshatriyas), to be crucial pillars of rule, though they were also much less political in their self-understanding than Confucian sages. Instead, they were becoming an educated status group, owning land
and controlling village life through their dominance of ritual. Meanwhile, the quadripartite varna system had become a pervasive element of north Indian social life. The shudras or servants, who brought up the bottom of the social and religious hierarchy, were regarded as ritually unclean and hence consigned to the lowest occupations. (Eventually, another group, the absolutely unclean “untouchables,” would be added as well; see Wolpert 2000: 42). More especially, they were forbidden to hear the Vedic mantras, possibly on pain of death or excruciating punishment, such as having molten lead poured in their ears. In all events, by this time Brahmanism had become associated with a traditionalistic defense of priestly privileges and of ritual – a ritual that was strongly bound up with sacrifice and hence with killing. And of course there was a good deal of killing going on in the society at large, despite the Magadha conquest of the Gangetic plain. The Mahabharata, the epic tale thought to reflect Indian life in approximately 1000 BCE but composed several centuries later, is “drenched in the blood of endless warfare” (Wolpert 2000: 38). The Brahmana era was thus one in which social hierarchy had become sharp, political authority centralized and unprecedentedly powerful, and religious life to a considerable extent a defense of this power and inequality.

In this context, there arose disquiet among thoughtful people concerning the direction of their society, provoking a variety of novel responses to their situation. These innovations competed against one another for adherents and experienced varying degrees of success; we must always remember that there is no foreordained outcome of the controversies over religious ideas. Perhaps the first development to discuss is the Upanishads, the first of which were composed in approximately the eighth century BCE but whose canonization was not secured until the late centuries of the first millennium BCE. In contrast to the stress in the Rig Veda on mantras and sacrifices as the means to salvation, the Upanishads promoted the idea of wandering in the forest in search of understanding. Thus emerged the figure of the mendicant ascetic who renounced conventional life in favor of the pursuit of wisdom; in the process, a rationalistic side was imparted to Indian religiosity. Along with the quest for wisdom, the Upanishads instructed that yoga exercises prepared the body for the abandonment of human striving, desire, and their consequent frustrations. The “quiescent, mindless, motionless inactivity of moksha” (Wolpert 2000: 46) – “release” from suffering – now became the chief goal of Vedantic meditation. Moksha could be achieved by knowledge of the self and the “all,” which required control over oneself and one’s desires. At the same time, the idea of samsara – an endless cycle of birth, death, and re-birth from which the individual can be freed only
with great difficulty or good fortune – comes to the fore. The linkage between *karma* and *samsara* emerges here as “a distinguishing axiom of Indic civilization” (Wolpert 2000: 47).

Max Weber viewed the idea of *karma* as the most complete, systematic solution of the “theodicy problem” – the question of the relation of god to the world – ever invented by the mind of man. Weber shows that the idea of *karma* entails the creation of a world in which all acts have consequences for the person’s fate in the next life; the person is enjoined to behave well in order to merit rebirth in a better station or, ideally, to be released from the wheel of rebirths entirely. As a result of this all-encompassing conception of the place of ethical action in the world, “the dualism of a sacred, omnipotent, and majestic god confronting the ethical inadequacy of all his creatures is altogether lacking” (Weber 1978: 526). As we will see later, Weber would seem to be contrasting the *karma* doctrine and its consequences with the ethical implications of the Jewish god created during roughly the same period in Israel/Palestine. As we have seen, Weber distinguishes between “ethical” and “exemplary” forms of salvation religion, and Hinduism clearly lies on the latter side of the divide between these two types. Consistent with his less “value-free” predispositions compared with Weber, Robert Bellah (2011: 489) seems to go even further in criticizing the basic orientations of Hinduism. He suggests that the durability in modern Hinduism of the ideas of the Rig Veda, which reflect the attitudes of a pre-state society, may entail the persistence in Indic religiosity of a tribal sensibility that “raises questions about the whole idea of religious evolution” that his *magnum opus* seeks to defend. Bellah seems to be suggesting that, from the standpoint of other world religions, there is something uniquely archaic or atavistic about the impulses of Indic religiosity.

While the concepts of *karma* and *samsara* would play a crucial role in subsequent Indian religion, this did not necessarily mean that they always played the same role in different religious systems. Let us first consider Jainism, which arose around 500 BCE and persists today as a small minority religion in India. At the outset, however, Jainism was a major source of a new worldview. The religion was associated with the teachings of Mahavira, a north Indian aristocrat who renounced his privileges and adopted a peripatetic life of teaching and contemplation. The Jains argued that all things, living or non-living, had a soul, and viewed *karma* – the principle of causation – as a substance that accumulated upon the soul to the extent that the individual acted in the world. Thus the Jains understood salvation in terms of “the escape of the soul from its adhering *karma* and its upward flight to live on forever in a realm of pure
bliss” (Farmer et al. 1977: 104). Salvation could only be achieved, however, by adherence to an extremely stringent series of rules that forbade killing, stealing, lying, sexual activity, and the ownership of property. The prohibition on killing and on causing any suffering – which the West came to know, through Gandhi, as the principle of *ahimsa* – was interpreted so strictly that Jains could not kill their own food; it had to be harvested by laymen. Mahavira is thought to have slowly starved himself to death in his attempt to live up to the strictures against killing. To this day, Jains will sweep off a chair before sitting down so as to insure that no living thing might die in the process.

The rewards of such a life of voluntary privation might seem few, but it continues to attract adherents – though understandably relatively few. A thirty-eight-year-old Jain nun recently had this to say about the rigors of her faith:

People think of our life as harsh, and of course in many ways it is. But going into the unknown world and confronting it without a single rupee in our pockets means that differences between rich and poor, educated and illiterate, all vanish, and a common humanity emerges…

This wandering life, with no material possessions, unlocks our souls. There is a wonderful sense of lightness, living each day as it comes, with no sense of ownership, no weight, no burden. Journey and destination became one… (Shulman 2010)

Like Mahavira, this Jain ascetic had resolved to commit suicide by starvation, the ultimate act of selflessness deriving from the Jains’ understanding of *ahimsa*. Due to the prohibition on harming living things, devout Jains have tended to avoid agricultural occupations and to be urbanites in mercantile occupations. Perhaps necessarily, the numbers of those willing to undergo the ascetic life associated with strict Jainism have been small, but it persists nonetheless. At the time that it emerged, Jainism represented an extreme version of the renunciation that would characterize much subsequent Indian religiosity.

Buddhism arose in this same historical context; Mahavira and the Buddha were roughly contemporaries, living on either side of the year 500 BCE. Given the high social origins of their princely north Indian progenitors, both of these doctrines originally emerged not from outside, but very much from within the privileged and educated milieu of Brahmana society. Siddhartha Gautama was a young noble who could look forward to a life of power and comfort, but he threw it all away for a life of wandering in search of the truth of existence. That truth, he concluded, was that this world was essentially an illusion, and that there was little to seek in this life. In contrast to Jainism, it should be
noted, there were no souls or selves to save in Buddhism. Instead, the aim was to avoid accumulating *karma* by stanching desire. Despite the lack of a soul to which *karma* could adhere, as in Jainism, Buddhists nonetheless regarded the accumulation of *karma* as inevitable for the unenlightened. They thus sought release – *moksha* – from entanglement in the world and the attainment of *nirvana*, a state beyond desire and hence beyond its frustrations. This exalted state was attainable more or less only by ascetic monks, who however relied on laymen for alms and donations. Those laypersons were at best likely to be able, through proper performance of the duties of their station, to be re-born as beings somewhat closer to enlightenment, release, and *nirvana*. And we are referring here primarily to men; the Buddha had doubts about the effect of women on his followers, and advised caution in dealing with them. In these respects, while diverging from the religious practices and ideas of Vedic religion, Buddhism failed to challenge very much the social arrangements – the *varna* system and patriarchal gender relations – inherited from Brahmanism. Indeed, according to the sociologist Randall Collins (1998: 205), “Buddhism laid down a basic cultural framework for lay society which eventually became Hinduism.”

The Buddhist *sangha* (brotherhood) gathered in monasteries, which gave them an organizational backbone and, in time, a thriving economic base. The monasteries symbolized the Buddhists’ retreat from the world, even if they did not entirely abandon the workaday world because they depended on the laity for their upkeep. (This pattern would be repeated elsewhere, as the monastic form found many imitators in the Near East, Europe, China, Japan, and elsewhere.) Having started as an effort from within educated Brahman circles to purify Brahmanism and rid it of its objectionable qualities (Collins 1998: 205), Buddhism gradually came to challenge it from a separate and organizationally superior position. Modern Hinduism would develop subsequently in response to the Buddhist challenge. As in Catholicism, however, Buddhism’s superior organizational position would eventually turn into a liability, weakening its reflexes and rendering it less able to respond to the Hindu challenge. We will discuss shortly the development of later Hinduism against the background of Buddhist predominance in India.

Taken together, the emergence of Jainism and Buddhism might be seen as Vedic Brahmanism’s Protestant Reformation. Early Buddhism resembles Lutheranism in the sense that it rebelled against the worldliness of its “mother-ship,” Brahmanism, finding in the more established vehicle a distraction from piety and a misuse of faith, and offered a refurbished doctrine meant to re-secure the connection to the sacred under very different terms – espe-
cially the doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*). Buddhism also was marked by a greater “reasonableness” than Jainism, a more relaxed quality comparable to Lutheranism’s less extreme rejection of established ecclesiastical authority when compared with the Reformed Protestant sects. As portrayed in a mural on the walls of a temple at Sarnath, where he first preached the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, the Buddha attained enlightenment only after abandoning severe asceticism in favor of meditation. The jovial figure of the Dalai Lama gives us some idea of the sort of sensibility that is meant to be cultivated. In contrast, Jainism was more similar to Reformed Protestantism, which was marked by rather greater rigor in the injunctions of the faith that they developed. Like Calvinism, Jainism took for granted that the greater the suffering of the believer, the better for his soul. Meanwhile, Buddhism was the only movement of its time to require that its monks preach to the laity, maintaining important links to them when others such as the Jains insisted on pure virtuoso religiosity. Finally, however, having conceived of the world as chiefly a realm of suffering, Buddhism’s ethics were somewhat more oriented toward relieving the suffering of others than Lutheranism’s insistence on “*sola fide*” – faith alone – as the guarantor of salvation. Since Buddhism valued “good *karma*,” it was also prepared to countenance good works as appropriate efforts on the path to salvation. Jainism encouraged non-harming as a path to salvation, but commanded little else in the way of helping others. In that regard, it might be said to have promoted a less communitarian orientation to the world, one not especially concerned about the fate of others. In this it differed notably from Reformed Protestantism’s stress on a God-fearing community intently concerned about the fate of one another’s souls.

The “Protestant reformation” analogy goes only so far, however. In contrast to the Christian faiths, which remain separated despite centuries of ecumenical soul-searching, Hinduism later would interpret the Buddha as a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu and re-absorb Buddhism into itself. Like a stream that divides in one place, only to converge again further downhill, Hinduism first spawned and then ingested Buddhism, such that it disappeared from its Indian birthplace, with the final coup de grace being administered by hostile Muslims in the early second millennium CE. Carried off by wandering monks seeking a more hospitable place to worship, Buddhism subsequently came to be more associated with East and Southeast Asia than with the land of its historical origins. Buddhism and Jainism emerged at first from the Brahmanic context, but their rejection of some of its elements and elaboration of novel stresses led to the foundation of new faiths with common roots but also with very different features.
Before we consider the emergence of later Hinduism and the transplantation of Buddhism to East Asia, however, we must examine a development that occurred on Asia’s western fringe, in what we now call the Middle East. This was the emergence of prophetic Judaism, which invented a radically new relationship between a people and its god(s), as intimated above in Weber’s discussion of the *karma* doctrine. We should first of all clarify the meaning here of “prophecy.” This activity had less to do with our sense of “divining the future” and more to do with interpreting the will of the gods. Thus, although they were sometimes foretelling the downfall of some tyrant for misbehavior, the prophets were chiefly articulating their understanding of the gods’ wishes of the people. In doing so, they reinforced the idea that the Israelites should endorse one god above all others. This stress on the worship of one god to the exclusion of others, or at least above those others, arose against the background of intense pressure on the Children of Israel, those who believed that their god had given them special claim to lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Beginning in the late second millennium BCE, the principal early kings of ancient Israel, Saul, David, and Solomon, sought to erect a strong state that would protect the Jews from their antagonists, especially the Assyrians, the Egyptians, and the Philistines. Yet Solomon’s state-building efforts made so many demands on the populace that, after his death in c. 925 BCE, resistance arose and the kingdom became divided into a northern and a southern part – Israel and Judah, respectively; it is from the latter that we have our name for the people and their religion. This period of the divided kingdom “corresponds roughly to the beginning of the continuous development and historical importance of the Hebrew practice of prophecy” (Farmer et al. 1977: 96).

The Jewish prophets of the eighth century BCE – not the first of their kind in Israel or elsewhere, but those Jewish exhorters who left the first texts more or less as we have them today – are traditionally thought to have built on the cult of Yahweh. Yet recent scholarship (Bellah 2011: 287ff.) suggests that the original god of Israel was not Yahweh, but El, and that ancestor worship was perhaps more important in ancient Israel than later became the case. The importance of El rather than Yahweh in early Jewish history helps make sense of the very name “Israel” (*Yisra-el*), which literally means “he who strives with god.” Thus was created a conception of god as a deity with whom a people wrestles, at least metaphorically. In the words of Diarmaid MacCulloch (2009: 50), the Jews are

1. According to Robert Bellah (2011: 287), however, the word Israel means “El rules,” and notes that this would also buttress the notion of El as the Israelites’ chief god before the rise of Yahweh to that position.
unusual in that they “struggle against the one whom they worship… The relationship of God with Israel is intense, personal, conflicted.” That relationship was also novel in the sense that it was based on a covenant binding the people to their god and creating a powerful bond between them.

According to Bellah, this view of the relationship was borrowed from Assyrian precursors, which however involved king and subjects, not god and people. In approximately 722 BCE, the Jews in Israel suffered destruction at the hands of the conquering Assyrians. Their ruler, Aššur, demanded loyalty to himself as god-king. As victims of the Assyrian onslaught, the Jews rejected those demands in favor of fealty to one god and one god only – Yahweh. The name of the ninth-century prophet Elijah, which means “Yahweh is my god” (MacCulloch 2009: 58), suggests the growing convergence of El with Yahweh and their gradual acceptance as synonyms. Insistence on the exclusive worship of Yahweh arose as an effort by the prophets, who were keenly attuned to the external threats to the Hebrews, to promote one particular god as the savior of the Jewish people. The choice of Yahweh was not foreordained; the period of the divided kingdom had “produced kings prepared to experiment with the gods of more powerful people” as possible protectors (MacCulloch 2009: 57). The fertility god Baal of the old Canaanite pantheon thus became one of the chief gods against which the prophets inveighed in their endorsement of Yahweh as the principal god of the Hebrews.

In the process, however, the prophets created the notion of a remote, all-powerful creator deity to whom they owed their chief obedience, above and beyond that to any earthly being. “A God who is finally outside society and the world provides the point of reference from which all existing presuppositions can be questioned… It is as if Israel took the most fundamental symbolism of the great archaic civilizations – God, king and people – and pushed it to the breaking point where something dramatically new came into the world” (Bellah 2011: 322). That something new was the idea of a people beholden to their obligations to their god, and vice versa. Against this background, the Hebrew prophets called the Jewish people – individually and collectively – to live up to their covenant with Yahweh/God. This emphasis frequently brought them into conflict with the earthly rulers of the people. For example, the very idea of a monarchy could be seen as inconsistent with the obligation to give one’s obedience to god, and there remain to this day orthodox Jews who object to the existence of the state of Israel as a blasphemous betrayal of Jewish ideals. (There are also those who regarded the deceased Lubavitcher Rebbe Meyer Schneerson as the long-awaited Messiah, effectively removing them, as far as some observers are concerned, from the Jewish fold.)
Then there were the criticisms of the specific policies of the kings. Thus the prophet Elijah inveighed against the corruption of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel and prophesied his doom. In the eighth century BCE, the Judean prophet Isaiah chastised the wealthy for their exploitation of the poor. But ultimately the message of the prophets was that it was the duty of every individual to honor the covenant with Yahweh. The ethical duties were outlined in the Ten Commandments, traditionally ascribed to Moses’ divine inspiration. Obedience to god’s commandments would, in turn, result in god’s approbation and the security and prosperity of the people. The notion that worldly success was a reward for religiously correct behavior promoted what Weber called the Jews’ “frank respect for wealth”; the ascetic idea that “the love of money is the root of many evils” would await the New Testament. The notion that the Jews were the chosen people of God also complicated the ethical terrain, promoting an in-group morality that regarded non-Jews as possible objects of usury while prohibiting such behavior with regard to fellow Jews. In all events, as prophetic Judaism developed, there emerged a deep and abiding tension between the particularism of the Jews’ covenant with Yahweh and the implicit universalism of the ethical creed. Yahweh’s commands were, in principle, valid for everyone, due to his remoteness and omnipotence. This all entailed a powerful push toward ethical concerns in Judaic religion and its successors.

As is well-known, Judaism was the progenitor of Christianity, but the latter’s conception was not, so to speak, immaculate; instead, Christianity was the product of a “Hellenized” Jewish culture that took root on the eastern fringes of the Roman empire. Its outlook derived in many ways from Greek precursors, filtered through Roman re-workings of that inheritance. We must therefore consider some of the elements of classical Greek culture that echoed down into later developments.

The Greeks of fifth-century Athens famously created a form of social organization widely regarded as unprecedented among state-bearing societies. That organization was the polis or “city-state,” the institution from which we derive our words for “politics” and “policy,” not to mention “police.” While it is often thought that the form of government in the fifth-century polis was “democracy,” this was by no means necessarily the case; poleis could be ruled by illegitimate usurpers (Peisistratus), oligarchies, or the mob (Aristotle’s understanding of “democracy”; he preferred what he called “polity,” rule by the many in the interest of those over whom they ruled, to the self-interested rule of the ordinary folk). Even when the polis was ruled “democratically,” we should understand that this democracy involved only about one-fifth of the adult male population.
Among those who participated, however, it was a direct democracy, relying on face-to-face assemblies and debates over matters concerning the city-state. Rhetoric therefore became a key element of classical Greek education. The Athenians thus invented a form of government that included many ordinary people and that, more importantly for our purposes, made decisions on the basis of persuasion and without divine sanction. The famous sixth-century lawgiver Solon, although acknowledging that justice came from the gods, claimed no divine sanction for himself or his actions. The link between divinity and rule, so characteristic a feature of previous states, was broken. Even if the gods were very much part of their world, the ecclesia ("assembly," but later the basis for the Italian chiesa [church] and of our word ecclesiastical) that made decisions for the polis did not need the sanction of the gods to do as they chose to do. One need not see in this the origins of the idea of "the separation of church and state," but it seems clear that the idea now had become thinkable in a way that it would not have been under previous dispensations elsewhere.

This human-centered mode of decision-making was strongly reflected in classical Greek art and sculpture, which was obsessed with representations of the human form. This enthusiasm for the human body went so far as to insist that athletic games be conducted in the nude, a practice that the Romans and others would later find positively embarrassing. To be sure, the emphasis was on the male form above all, and classical Greece certainly remained a man’s world. Even male homosexuality was exalted above other forms as the most fitting expression of human love.

Greek religion was also remarkably human-centered for its time. In contrast to the phantasmagorical figures we associate with Indic religiosity, the Greek gods were represented as larger-than-life versions of human beings and conceived very much in human terms. Temples were homes for the gods, not places of worship. Meanwhile, in classical Greece of the fifth century, there was no separate priestly stratum; Greek priests were officials of the state ‘in exactly the same sense as generals or treasurers or market commissioners… with the same tenure and rotation of office, as the others’ (Finley 1963: 48).

Meanwhile, the bards who passed down the stories from the heroic period that followed the collapse of Mycenaean civilization around 1200 BC were just that, poets, not priests on the Brahmanic model who guarded sacred knowledge and dispensed it for a fee. The gods played a central role in those stories, and, according to Herodotus, it was Homer who ‘‘first fixed for the Greeks the genealogy of the gods, gave the gods their titles, divided among them their honours and functions, and defined their images’’ (quoted in Finley 1963: 26). But,
unlike the Vedas, which were the property of the Brahmin priests, the stories were understood as the common possession of all Greeks, and while the gods were very human-like, the degree to which human beings were also raised up to a level close to the gods was also striking.

The Greeks also exhibited a pronounced desire to make sense of the empirical world, a practice that we now know as philosophy. Two of the most remarkable of the “lovers of wisdom,” Plato and Aristotle, bequeathed to posterity resources for thinking about the world that continue to generate insight and controversy. For present purposes, Plato is perhaps the more important figure, as he contributed ideas about religion that would have profound ramifications later on. First, and perhaps as a result of Jewish influences, he advanced a conception of god as perfect oneness. Like the Jews, Plato also stressed transcendence in his view of God. Yet, in contrast to the God of the Hebrews, who were busy wrestling with each other, Plato’s conception of a perfect god was passionless and unchanging. This would later help provide Christianity with a conception of divinity as remote and impervious to influence, the “deus absconditus” that Weber argued left the Calvinist in “an unprecedented state of inner loneliness” about the fate of his soul. In addition, Plato mused about the existence of an individual soul, a spark of immortality that outlived and was ultimately more real than the mortal housing in which it existed in this life. Such a view differed sharply from the Jews’ attitudes on the matter at this time; until the time of the Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE, according to MacCulloch (2009: 70), Jewish writings on the matter suggest “that human life comes to an end and, for all but a few exceptional people, that is it.” The preoccupation with life after death would surely be one of the major features that would permit later observers to regard “Christianity” as something other than the Judaism from which it had originally emerged.

In some ways like the Greeks, the Chinese during the middle of the first millennium BCE also underwent a period of profound reflection on the human being’s place in the world. Just as Plato has been the central figure in Western philosophy since he taught, Confucius has played a similarly decisive role in subsequent Chinese and East Asian thought. The teachings of Confucius revolve around questions of correct ritual and of goodness rather than of the individual’s relationship with a divinity. Hence, like the developments associated with classical Athens, Confucianism has long been regarded as strongly “secular” in character. Against the background of much violence due to a collapse of the Western Zhou state, Confucius was above all concerned with recovering the supposed harmony of that earlier period by a return to the proper performance of ritual.
Confucius insisted that, while it was important to be in tune with the desires of Heaven, human beings choose their own fate. They could thus choose to do right or to do wrong, and the cultivation of “the gentleman” involved training toward inner reserve and self-control with the aim of producing an individual who was no one’s “tool.”

Weber viewed Confucianism as “the status ethic of prebendaries, of men with literary educations who were characterized by a secular rationalism” (Weber 1945: 268). The “secular” qualities of Confucianism have raised questions ever since about whether or not these doctrines should be regarded as a “religion” or not. For Weber, “Confucianism is rationalist to such far-going extent that it stands at the extreme boundary of what one might possibly call a ‘religious’ ethic” (Weber 1945: 293). In The Religion of China, Weber (1951) describes Confucianism as a philosophy of rational adjustment to the world, but one that could also co-exist peaceably with the “magic garden” of Taoism. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of Chinese religiosity is its capacity for co-habitation among a variety of belief systems that seem almost incompatible with one another. Chinese religion thus lacks the tendency toward exclusivism that characterizes all the major faiths that originated to its west – Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In any case, Weber contrasted the accommodative impulses toward the world of Confucianism with the otherwise similarly rationalistic impulses of Puritanism. In Weber’s view, whereas Confucianism sought to inculcate adjustment to the world as it is, Puritanism instilled the sense of a tension with the world that led the Calvinist to want to transform the world into a place that would conform to God’s dictates. It made the Puritan into a “tool of the divine”; in contrast, the Confucian gentleman could not be anyone’s “tool.” “The Confucian owed nothing to a supra-mundane God; therefore, he was never bound to a sacred ‘cause’ or an ‘idea’” (Weber 1951: 236). In sum, according to Weber, Confucianism inculcated a radically “optimistic” outlook that was at odds with the strictures of an ethical god enjoining action in this world to make it more consistent with that god’s notions about how the world should be. It was thus ethically inadequate, not up to the level particularly of reformed Protestantism and its demands on the believer.

In his 2011 study of Religion in Human Evolution, Robert Bellah suggests that this understanding of Confucianism is fundamentally wrong-headed. The reason for Weber’s misunderstanding may again perhaps be traced to his preoccupation with the “economic ethics of the world religions,” rather than with their political proclivities. In Bellah’s view, Confucius’s insistence that the rulers properly
observe the time-honored rituals supplied the foundation for the notion that China’s rulers needed to serve the interests of their subjects. Otherwise, their legitimacy as rulers would be squandered. This is the background to the idea that Chinese rulers have “the mandate of heaven,” but also that they can lose that mandate if they fail to live up to its requirements. Beyond this, however, there is also in Confucianism “an ideal of human self-cultivation leading to an identification with an ultimate moral order, with the Dao and the will of Heaven, that is available to individuals, however grim the social situation and however much they may seem to have ‘failed’ to bring good order to society” (Bellah 2011: 476). Confucianism and other Chinese systems of thought thus instilled in both the Chinese and their rulers moral standards that entailed a tension with the prevailing order of things; these systems of ideas were not merely modes of adjustment to the status quo, as Weber suggested. Thus, Bellah argues, “given Weber’s enormously influential analysis of China as a stagnant, traditional society, it is perhaps well to point out that such was not the heritage of the axial age to later Chinese history” (Bellah 2011: 279).

**Conclusion**

These reflections on the varied directions of “religious rejections of the world” suggest the basic difference in outlook that characterizes Weber’s sociology of the world religions, on the one hand, and the impulses of the “axial age” thesis, on the other. They point to the ways in which Weber was more inclined to stress the divergent emphases of the various religions that emerged from the ancient world and late antiquity than he was to emphasize their commonalities. Weber focused mainly on the complex implications of these doctrines and practices for the worldviews and patterns of behavior of those who embodied them. In contrast, the notion of an “axial age” is one that highlights the shared basic unity of the intellectual-religious breakthrough that occurred in the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE. Weber’s lack of commitment to any strong notion of a coherent “age” keeps him immune from the unavoidable debate generated by the “axial age” thesis over the periodization of the emergence of “man as we know him today”. Christianity and Islam – about which Weber failed to complete planned full-scale studies, and hence not addressed at length here – nonetheless emerge from Weber’s explorations as faiths fully equal to the other “world religions” that shaped the world in which he lived and that he wanted to interpret through the lens of comparative religion. The axial age thesis thus calls our attention to certain world-historical developments that laid down the tracks of much later development, but it distracts us from a more complete
understanding of the intellectual-religious forces that created the world as we know it now. Weber’s approach is thus more illuminating.

References


