

Decolonizing Philosophy? Habermas and the Axial Age

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I. Introduction: Postsecularism as a Decolonizing Project

The “postsecular” phase in Jürgen Habermas’s work began as an attempt to decolonize philosophy. Ever since his address at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt in October 2001, Habermas has linked the goal of developing a postsecular approach in philosophy and politics to the need to redress the balance between the West and the rest of the world.¹ It is no longer possible, he says, to take secular European society as the global norm. Philosophy and political theory must acknowledge the fact that “occidental rationalism,” rather than being a model for the rest of the world, is in fact the *Sonderweg* or deviant path.² For Habermas, this Eurocentrism takes the form of an unreflexive secularism: assuming, based on European experience, that the decline of religion is inevitable, that religion has no place in politics, and that philosophical reason has nothing in common with religious faith. Modifying the secular assumptions of philosophy and political theory is therefore the first step towards a rapprochement with the non-Western world — a rapprochement that is desperately needed if Western thinkers are not to appear as “crusaders of a competing religion or as salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization.”³ Although it is rarely acknowledged, this anti-Eurocentric impulse is at the heart of Habermas’s postsecular project.

There are three strands to the project. In terms of social theory, Habermas argues that we should no longer make the Weberian assumption that increasing prosperity inevitably leads to a decline in religious belief. Modernization does not equal secularization.⁴ In terms of political theory, he adjusts his model of deliberative democracy so as to open the public sphere to religious inputs. Religious citizens of secular states, Habermas argues, cannot accept laws formulated in exclusively secular terms as fully legitimate. They suffer from having their identities split into public and private, secular and religious segments. To remedy this, religious citizens must be allowed to contribute to the informal public sphere in religious language, so long as their contributions are “translated” into secular terms before influencing the legislative process.⁵ This is the right of all reflexive believers. As well as easing the problems, Habermas suggests, these contributions by religious citizens may contain ethical insights that have the potential to enrich secular ethical discourse.⁶

In philosophical terms, Habermas argues that philosophy should address its alienation from religion, its privileging of secular reason over religious faith. He tries to show that modern philosophical reason has a close connection to religious belief through a genealogical argument involving Karl Jaspers’s axial age hypothesis. This will be the focus of this article. I will argue that this genealogical argument damages Habermas’s overall project in two ways. First, the thoroughly Eurocentric (in fact, Hegelian) nature of Jaspers’s hypothesis undermines the decolonial goal of the postsecular project. Second, the genealogical argument that Habermas builds on the axial age hypothesis has implications that are incompatible with the political strand of the postsecular project.

The article begins by explaining Karl Jaspers’s axial age hypothesis (II) and the role it plays in Habermas’s postsecular genealogy of reason (III). It then explores some of the problems with the axial age hypothesis; namely, that it is suffused with the very Eurocentrism that Habermas wishes to overcome (IV), and represents an unsuccessful attempt to break away from Hegelian philosophy of history (V–VI). As a result, the philosophical strand of the postsecular project conflicts with the political strand. The conclusion argues that an alternative genealogical argument, also found in Habermas’s writings, can fulfill the philosophical strand of the postsecular project more effectively than a genealogy based on Jaspers’s hypothesis, without encountering the same problems.

II. The Axial Age Hypothesis

Karl Jaspers introduces the axial age hypothesis in *The Origin and Goal of History*, first published in 1949. His central claim in that text is that human thinking underwent a radical change during the period between 800 and 200 BCE — a change so fundamental and transformative that this period constitutes the “axis-time” (*Achsenzeit*) of history. As Jaspers puts it, this is 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 . . . Man, as we know him today, came into being.⁷

He argues that the axial transition took place simultaneously and independently in Greece, Israel, India and China.⁸ It was embodied in the new religions,

philosophies and ethical systems that emerged in these regions and later spread throughout the world. For Jaspers the philosophical schools of Greece, India and China, and religions such as Judaism and Buddhism, are all axial phenomena. The axial advances were initiated by great thinkers and prophets: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Greece, Confucius and Lao-Tse in China, Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah in Israel, and Siddhartha Gautama, Mahāvira, and the authors of the Upanishads in India.⁹

Jaspers sees the axial transition as a revolution in human thought and subjectivity. The key theme, which he detects in the ideas of all the axial regions, is a new awareness of *transcendence*. Whereas pre-axial thought did not distinguish between the worldly and the divine, the revolutionary thinkers of this period broke free from the immanent frame of mythical thought, and achieved a transcendent viewpoint from which to contemplate the world and human life as a whole. Axial figures succeeded in thinking their way outside the world:

in soaring towards the idea, in the resignation of *ataraxia*, in the absorption of meditation, in the knowledge of his self and the world as *atman*, in the experience of *nirvana*, in concord with the *tao*, or in surrender to the will of God. These paths are widely divergent in their conviction and dogma, but common to all of them is man's reaching out beyond himself by growing aware of himself within the whole of Being and the fact that he can tread them only as an individual on his own.¹⁰

This was a transition from *mythos* to *logos*, from polytheism to monotheism, from entanglement in immediate experience to the attainment of rational distance. It eclipsed the pre-axial thought of civilizations such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Hwang-ho Valley.

This central cognitive achievement of the axial age had enormous consequences for ethics, politics, and religion. The transcendent viewpoint, says Jaspers, can only be attained individually, whether by philosophical contemplation, meditation, or divine revelation. All the axial schools of thought therefore place a high value on reflexivity and discipline. It is no longer enough to simply participate in traditional rituals and fulfill one's social obligations. Axial thinking calls for a radical degree of self-examination, of questioning and cultivating one's own subjectivity. "This overall modification of humanity," says Jaspers, "may be termed *spiritualisation*."¹¹ Along with a new appreciation for human mortality and finitude, this attitude gives rise to ethical standards. All the axial traditions present some particular way of life as the good for human beings, whether it is the cultivation of *sophia* and *phronesis*, obedience to the laws of a divine covenant, or accordance with a cosmic order. The ethical standards attained in this way could be brought

to bear on social institutions and practices, as well as individual conduct. This allowed axial thinkers such as Socrates and Jeremiah to make strident criticisms of their societies.

For Jaspers, all other Enlightenments pale in comparison to the axial age. The intellectual revolution of 800–200 BCE forms the horizon of our thought to this day; it created human subjectivity as we know it. The only event that approaches its impact on human life, according to Jaspers, is the rise of modern science and technology.¹² John D. Boy and John Torpey argue that in developing the axial age hypothesis Jaspers was driven by the desire to find a non-materialist basis for an account of human nature, with liberal-humanist implications, as an alternative to the materialist account offered by Marxism.¹³ They attribute the current popularity of the hypothesis to

efforts to develop what might be called (following Habermas) a "postmetaphysical" philosophy of history, an attempt to find an empirical (but non-biological) basis for imputing a common humanity at least to the cultures associated with the world's major religious traditions.¹⁴

The ongoing influence of axial age hypothesis can be seen in the work of the sociologists Shmuel Eisenstadt¹⁵ and Robert Bellah,¹⁶ and in the popular writings of Karen Armstrong.¹⁷

Habermas's conception of the axial age sticks closely to that of Jaspers. Like Jaspers, he considers the period's central innovation to be "the breakthrough to a transcendent point of view, whether in the guise of a monotheistic deity or of a cosmic law."¹⁸ The axial religions, says Habermas, "made the cognitive leap from mythical narratives to a logos that differentiates between essence and appearance in a very similar way to Greek philosophy."¹⁹ Axial thinking

made it possible to take a synoptic view of the world as a whole from a transcendent point of view and to distinguish the flood of phenomena from the underlying essences. Moreover, reflection on the place of the individual in the world gave rise to a new awareness of historical contingency and of the responsibility of the acting subject.²⁰

In this way, the axial transition made a context-transcending perspective possible.²¹ Habermas agrees with Jaspers that this innovation had consequences for political legitimation and critique, as well as subjectivity. The transition enabled "the emerging intellectual elites made up of prophets, wise men, monks, and itinerant preachers" to

transcend events in the world, including political processes, and to adapt a detached stance toward them en bloc. . . . The reference to a divinity outside the world

or to the internal base of a cosmic law liberates the human mind from the grip of the narratively ordered flood of occurrences under the sway of mythical powers and makes an individual quest for salvation possible.²²

To a great extent, then, all the elements of Jaspers's original version are present in Habermas's conception of the axial age. The hypothesis is evidently of great interest to Habermas. Aside from all these references in his recent writings, his forthcoming book, *Essay on Faith and Knowledge*, will contain a chapter entitled "The Sacred Roots of the Axial Age Traditions."²³ This raises the question of the place of the concept in his postsecular project. What does Habermas *do* with the axial age hypothesis?

III. Habermas's Genealogical Arguments

The axial age hypothesis comes into play in the philosophical strand of Habermas's postsecular project.²⁴ His target here is what he calls the "exclusively secular" understanding of philosophical reason. Philosophers see reason and faith as diametrically opposed; religious belief is the "opaque other of reason,"²⁵ an archaic remnant that they have left behind. When they do engage with religious discourse, they operate with the assumption that it must be purged of its irrational elements in order to divulge its useful insights. This attitude is exemplified, for Habermas, by Kant's project of reconstructing religion "within the bounds of reason alone" and Hegel's characterization of religion as a moment in the dialectic of absolute spirit, ultimately sublated by philosophy.²⁶ The underlying assumption in both cases is that philosophical reason can unilaterally determine which elements of religious belief are rational, and which irrational.²⁷ Religion and philosophy are not equal *partners in dialogue*, with the potential to learn from each other — the former is rather an *object of investigation* for the latter.

Habermas's aim is to rectify this situation by showing that philosophical reason and religious faith are not, in fact, diametric opposites, with the ultimate goal of overcoming the Eurocentric assumption that philosophy is exclusively secular. As a means to this end, he deploys two types of genealogical argument.²⁸ I will discuss these in turn.

III.i The Major Genealogical Argument

Habermas's major genealogical argument concerns the history of philosophical reason *as a whole*. This is where he makes use of the axial age hypothesis. His central claim is that philosophical reason and religious faith have a common point of origin. They are both products of the cognitive revolution of 800–200 BCE, the transition from *mythos* to *logos*. To put it more precisely,

Habermas argues that ancient philosophy and the traditional "world religions" are phenomena of the axial age. They both make use of a transcendent viewpoint, the attainment of which was the major cognitive achievement of the axial age. Modern (reflexive) religious belief and modern (for Habermas, postmetaphysical) philosophical reason are the descendants of these axial intellectual formations. So rather than being opposites, religion and philosophy are in reality estranged siblings. A correct understanding of the history of philosophical reason will show that it has much in common with that of religious faith, thus undermining philosophy's exclusively secular self-understanding and all that goes with it. This is what Habermas means when he says that modern reason

will learn to understand itself only when it clarifies its relation to a contemporary religious consciousness which has become reflexive by grasping the shared origin of the two contemporary intellectual formations in the cognitive advance of the Axial Age.²⁹

Amy Allen raises the question of what kind of genealogical argument Habermas is making here. She distinguishes between three varieties: subversive genealogy, which undermines values and concepts, vindicatory genealogy, which raises questions about values and concepts only to re-affirm them, and problematizing genealogy, which brings to light the difficulties, tensions, and power-relations within them.³⁰ Allen suggests that Habermas aims to carry out a problematizing genealogy of secular philosophical reason, revealing its suppressed connection to religion. At the same time, however, he relies on what she calls a "whiggish," valedictory genealogy of philosophical reason itself in assuming that postmetaphysical thinking is the result of a historical learning process that can be rationally reconstructed.³¹ In effect, Allen argues, Habermas still holds to the belief that secular philosophical reason is an advance on religious faith. To appreciate this point, it is necessary to go into the major genealogical argument in greater detail.

To unpack Habermas's claim that modern philosophical reason descends from the axial age, we must bear in mind his particular conceptions of philosophy and reason. He describes his philosophical paradigm as *post-metaphysical*. According to Habermas, earlier philosophical paradigms such as metaphysics and the philosophy of consciousness saw reason as an Archimedean point from which the philosopher, acting alone, could make judgments about ultimate reality, human nature, and the good. This was a transcendent, extramundane conception of reason that allowed the philosopher to reach out towards the world of forms or the noumenal world.³² Postmetaphysical thinking, in contrast, operates with a deflated, "detranscendentalized" conception of reason. It sees reason as being located at the human

level, embodied in the communicative processes of the lifeworld.³³ As a result, the claims of postmetaphysical thinking are far more modest than those of metaphysics, limited to the “transcendence from within” of language. They are falsifiable, and invested only with the “quasi-transcendental” force of contestable validity claims, instead of the transcendental authority of metaphysical statements. Rather than trying to determine the nature of reality or the good, postmetaphysical thinking aims to rationally reconstruct lifeworld processes and to mediate between the lifeworld and the “expert cultures” of science, art, law, and morality.³⁴

What Habermas is claiming in his major genealogical argument is that the transcendent conception of reason possessed by ancient philosophy emerged in the axial transition. It was detranscendentalized, in the modern era, to become postmetaphysical thinking’s more modest conception of reason. Crucially, religious faith, with its revelations and universal claims, is *also* an example of the context-transcending thought of the axial age.³⁵ Philosophical reason and religious faith share this point of origin. As Allen puts it, Habermas, following Jaspers, is making a (possibly paradoxical) claim about the context of the emergence of context-transcending thought.³⁶ Like postmetaphysical philosophy, religious belief has in the modern era modified some of its claims to transcendence, thereby becoming “reflexive.”³⁷

Understanding this shared genealogy — so Habermas assumes — makes it impossible for philosophy to see religion as entirely foreign. He insists that philosophy must acknowledge its internal relationship to “those world religions whose origins, like those of ancient philosophy, date back to the middle of the first millennium before Christ, i.e. to what Jaspers called the Axial Age.”³⁸ Hitherto, although it has “acknowledged metaphysics as belonging to the prehistory of its own emergence,” it has “treated revelation as something alien and extraneous.” The major genealogical argument should rectify this:

the perspective from which postmetaphysical thinking approaches religion shifts once secular reason takes seriously the shared origin of philosophy and religion in the revolution of worldviews of the Axial Age (around the middle of the first millennium BCE).³⁹

A reformed philosophical reason, aware of the axial genealogy it shares with religious faith, will be better equipped to engage the latter in dialogue as an equal partner, without presuming that it speaks from a position of automatic authority. This postsecular reason, says Habermas, “eschews the rationalist presumption that it can itself decide which aspects of religious doctrines are rational and which irrational.”⁴⁰ The knowledge of their shared genealogy

enables them to enter into a dialogue in which postmetaphysical thinking can aspire to “translate” theological contents without having to confront the question of the relative “value” of the one or the other side.⁴¹

The exclusively secular self-understanding of reason, according to Habermas, has made philosophy Eurocentric. By making philosophical reason *postsecular*, the major genealogical argument rectifies this narrowness. It is one step in the process of decolonizing philosophy.

It is worth considering why Habermas chooses the axial age hypothesis as the basis for his major genealogical argument. Although I have referred to the goal of his postsecular project as “decolonial,” this is something of an overstatement. Decolonial theory, in the sense developed by Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Santiago Castro-Gómez and others,⁴² is radically anti-universalist. It aims to challenge the “hubris of the zero point,” arguing that our notions of universal reason and truth are in reality a recent European invention, complicit in Europe’s colonial domination of the rest of the world. Although Habermas’s projects aims to rectify Eurocentrism in philosophy, he does not take such a radically anti-universalist approach as these theorists — indeed, his philosophical work has long been characterized by the determination to salvage an acceptable form of cognitive and moral universalism, grounded in the human capacity for communicative action. Jaspers, crucially, shares this goal. He sees the shared heritage of the axial age as a basis for universal communication, saying that the “venture into boundless communication is once again the secret of becoming-human.”⁴³ As Habermas sees it, Jaspers offers his philosophical approach to religious traditions as the key to transforming conflict into dialogue: “philosophically mediated insight into the essential situation of human beings is supposed to overcome the will to destruction through a will to communication.”⁴⁴ Although he criticizes Jaspers for neglecting the question of the social and political conditions necessary to enable this “existential communication,”⁴⁵ Habermas agrees that the religions of the axial age can converge on an “ethical self-understanding of the species” that grounds a universal morality.⁴⁶ What is common to Jaspers and Habermas, in the latter’s postsecular stage, is a desire to displace Eurocentric notions of reason and morality without descending into relativism. Both wish to retain a certain universalism, based on boundless communication, although they understand the basis for such communication differently — in Habermas’s case, it is a fundamental capacity of socialized human beings, while in Jaspers’s it is a result of the common heritage of the axial transition.

III.ii The Minor Genealogical Arguments

Alongside this major genealogical argument, which concerns the history of philosophical reason as a whole, Habermas makes a series of minor genealogical arguments, which concern only the histories of individual philosophical concepts. Habermas's claim here is that many (apparently secular) concepts used by philosophers in fact have religious roots. Tracing back their genealogies reveals that they originated as "appropriations" or "translations" of religious ideas. Investigating these genealogies illuminates the occluded history of the continuous interchange between philosophy and religion over the centuries.

"Since the Council of Nicaea," says Habermas, "philosophy . . . took on board and assimilated many motifs and concepts, especially those associated with salvation, from monotheistic traditions in the course of a Hellenization of Christianity."⁴⁷ This "atheistic assimilation of religious contents" has been a particularly strong tendency in German Idealism and Western Marxism. Habermas lists Bloch's idea of hope, Benjamin's concepts of anamnestic solidarity and messianism, and the role that the ban on graven images plays in Adorno's negative dialectics, as examples.⁴⁸ Similarly, he claims that the concepts of the *summum bonum*, the ethical community⁴⁹ and radical evil⁵⁰ in Kant are philosophical "translations" of religious notions such as providence, the kingdom of God, and evil. Habermas has in fact been identifying religious genealogies for philosophical concepts for quite some time. In a text written in 1988, long before his postsecular turn, he argues that "German Idealism with the concept of the Absolute appropriated theoretically the God of creation and gracious love," and that "it also with a logical reconstruction of the process of the world as a whole appropriated theoretically the traces of salvation history."⁵¹ Thus, he finds a religious genealogy for the Absolute, going back to the concept of God, and for Hegelian philosophy of history, going back to theodicies and salvation history. Ideally, these acts of appropriation do not simply wrench concepts out of religious discourse and secularize them. Habermas insists that the "contents that reason appropriates through translation must not be lost for faith."⁵² Conceptual appropriation should be a dialogical process.

These minor genealogical arguments serve the same purpose as Habermas's major genealogical argument. As part of the philosophical strand of his postsecular project, they seek to undermine the alienation between philosophical reason and religious faith. The genealogies of these appropriated concepts anchor philosophy to religion. If there is a history of borrowing, translation, and interaction between the two — if many of philosophy's concepts originated in religious traditions — then

religion cannot be the "opaque other of reason," and philosophy cannot see itself in exclusively secular terms. The ultimate goal, once again, is to rectify philosophy's Eurocentric self-understanding as a secular discipline, so as to enable a fruitful dialogue with the non-Western world.

Habermas's major genealogical argument has received some criticism.⁵³ Rather than assessing its strength or weakness, in the remainder of this article I will turn to the question of whether it is at all compatible with his postsecular project as a whole.

IV. "Negroes etc.": The Problem of Eurocentrism in the Axial Age Hypothesis

The axial age hypothesis is suffused with the very Eurocentrism that Habermas aims to overcome. This makes it an inappropriate component for a project that aims at decolonizing philosophy — a component that ultimately damages the project as a whole. Jaspers's hypothesis can no more be used to overcome Eurocentrism than Hegel's philosophy of history — a body of thought with which it has much in common.

Like any theory of universal history, the axial age has an inside and an outside. As Jaspers puts it, the hypothesis is "a yardstick with whose aid we measure the historical significance of the various peoples to mankind as a whole."⁵⁴ Some peoples have significance, others do not. This problem is particularly acute in Jaspers's case, since he sees the axial transformation as the origin of modern human subjectivity ("Man, as we know him today, came into being"). It follows that the excluded peoples lack not only historical significance, but full humanity.

For Jaspers, two categories of people are excluded from the cognitive benefits of the axial age. First, there are the major civilizations that were established before the transition, namely Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley culture and the Hwang-ho Valley culture. I will refer to these as *pre-axial*. Second, there are the peoples geographically and culturally separated from the axial regions during the crucial centuries. This category, which I will refer to as *non-axial*, includes all the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and Australasia.

It is fair to say that Jaspers has a low opinion of the pre-axial civilizations. Whatever their political or social achievements, he sees them as lacking in terms of abstract thought, depth of subjectivity and ethical sensitivity. These civilizations

may have been magnificent in their own way, but they appear in some manner unawakened. . . . Measured against the lucid humanity of the Axial Period, a strange veil seems to lie over the most ancient cultures

preceding it, as though man had not yet really come to himself.⁵⁵

They possessed

a magical religion destitute of philosophical enlightenment, devoid of any quest for salvation and lacking any breakthrough into liberty in the face of extreme situations, as well as a singular apathy accompanying extraordinary stylistic achievements in art,

particularly architecture and sculpture.⁵⁶ In general, Jaspers considers these societies to have been spiritually impoverished, unenlightened, unreflexive about matters of justice and individual authenticity, and lacking in curiosity about fundamental questions.⁵⁷ At times Jaspers seems to regard pre-axial people as less than fully human. These societies, he says, were populated by “a type of human who, despite his more refined civilization, has something unawakened about him,” combining the instrumental reason necessary to build cities and govern empires with an “unawakenedness devoid of authentic reflection.”⁵⁸ If modern humanity begins with the axial breakthrough, after all, then those who have no part in the breakthrough cannot fully belong to it.

These troubling aspects of the axial age hypothesis have rarely been noted by commentators. Bjorn Thomassen observes that most modern anthropologists would find this side of Jaspers’s hypothesis unacceptable, since it is reminiscent of earlier tendencies to divide human societies into historical and unhistorical, or rational and pre-logical categories. This division is usually to the advantage of the West. Thomassen adds that, in light of the recent revival in popularity of the hypothesis, “it is at any rate strange that no critical examination of Jaspers’s axial age hypothesis has taken place with reference to the anthropological record of non-axial or pre-axial cultures.”⁵⁹ Jaspers’s philosophy of history has been criticized with regard to its factual accuracy. Its moral implications have largely escaped notice. More rides on this issue than the question of fairness to long-vanished cultures like the Mesopotamians, as we will see if we turn to Jaspers’s assessment of non-axial peoples.

According to Jaspers, non-axial peoples have nothing to contribute to the intellectual development of humanity. Outside the axial regions:

the vast territories of Northern Asia, Africa and America . . . were inhabited by men but saw the birth of nothing of importance to the history of the spirit.⁶⁰

Real human history, as Jaspers understands it, begins with the axial breakthrough. It follows that non-axial peoples have no history. They remain the same in perpetuity, never changing or developing. Jaspers refers to the “prehistoric and unhistoric peoples (the primitives till they died out or became material for technological

civilization),” who “did not come to history, but collapsed at their first contact with the historical cultures.” These non-axial peoples belong to nature rather than history: “within their own limited range they achieved astonishing things, but they were as though bound to the substratum of natural life, into which they continually threatened to slip back.”⁶¹

It is only by coming into contact with one of the axial regions that these peoples are “drawn into history.”⁶² Typically, this takes the form of conquest or colonization by an axial culture. Jaspers concedes that “for many primitive peoples this contact resulted in their extinction,”⁶³ but nonetheless sees it in a positive light. His comments on the colonization of the New World are exemplary in this respect. “From Europe,” says Jaspers, “America was populated and provided with spiritual foundations.”⁶⁴ During this process the pre-Columbian American civilizations, which were on the same level as Egypt or Mesopotamia, “vanished before the mere presence of Western culture deriving from the Axial Period.”⁶⁵ It is not hard to draw out the colonial implications of the Jaspers’s theory: they are as plain as day. As he sees it, Europeans are the inheritors of the axial cultures of Greece and Israel. They may have exploited and oppressed the peoples of Africa, the Americas and the Pacific, but at the same time they brought them the benefits of the axial breakthrough. The nadir of this aspect of Jaspers’s thinking can be seen in the schematic diagram that concludes the second chapter of *The Origin and Goal of History*. The right-hand branch of this diagram starts at “Prehistory” and goes via “Primitive peoples” and “Extinction” to “Negroes etc.”⁶⁶

Of course, the axial age hypothesis cannot simply be dismissed as Eurocentric, since Jaspers counts China and India as axial regions. As Boy and Torpey observe “his definition of the axial age includes billions of non-Europeans who would never make it into any definition of ‘the West’ and in that sense is non-Eurocentric.”⁶⁷ Despite this, the exclusion of non-axial cultures means that

Jaspers’s scheme appears in certain respects to reproduce earlier Eurocentric models of universal history, though now broadened into a Eurasian-centric paradigm . . . despite Jaspers’s intention to reorient historical thought in the direction of a universal humanity, his conception of the axial age actually leaves out large swathes of the human race.⁶⁸

The axial age hypothesis may not be Eurocentric in the traditional sense. But even if we count it as merely “Eurasia-centric” it still excludes most of the non-Western world from the cognitive and ethical history of the human race. This fact alone raises questions about the suitability of the hypothesis for Habermas’s post-secular project, which aims to rectify the Western focus

of philosophy and political theory. And, as we will see, Jaspers's assessment of China and India is not as benign as Boy and Torpey assume. The responsibility for this, and for many of the problematic aspects of the hypothesis, can be attributed to the ghost at the axial feast: Hegel's philosophy of history.

V. A Postmetaphysical Philosophy of History? Jaspers and Hegel

There is a great deal of veiled Hegelianism in Jaspers's thought. The axial age hypothesis can be seen as an unsuccessful attempt to break away from Hegel's philosophy of history — an attempt that ends up replicating many of its most problematic aspects. If we look at it in this way, we can clarify some of the central problems that affect both the hypothesis itself and the use which Habermas makes of it in his postsecular project.

Hegelian motifs can be found throughout *The Origin and Goal of History*. The axial transformation itself, a development on the intellectual level with no clear material cause, is reminiscent of one of the evolutions of spirit in Hegel's thought. The importance of great thinkers in bringing about this development calls to mind the role of "world-historical individuals" in Hegel's philosophy of history, although Jaspers's examples are theorists and prophets rather than conquerors and politicians.⁶⁹ These are obvious parallels, which need not cause difficulties for Habermas. Other Hegelian aspects of the axial age hypothesis are harder to swallow, however. I have in mind here the contrasts between nature and spirit and between historical and unhistorical peoples, and the ambiguous position of Asian civilizations.

There is a clear distinction in Hegel's work between nature and spirit. He sees natural phenomena as stable and repetitive, endlessly replicating themselves rather than progressing:

The reawakening of nature is merely the repetition of one and the same process; it is a tedious chronicle in which the same cycle recurs again and again. There is nothing new under the sun.⁷⁰

This is because nature develops in an unopposed way; its development is not mediated by dialectical negations.

But it is otherwise in the world of the spirit. The process whereby its inner determination is translated into reality is mediated by consciousness and will. . . . That development which, in the natural world, is a peaceful process of growth — for it retains its identity and remains self-contained in its expression — is in the spiritual world at once a hard and unending conflict with itself.⁷¹

For this reason, spiritual development is progressive. Spirit "never stands still"⁷² — its dialectical movement

constantly drives it on to assume new forms, in contrast to the stability and repetition of nature. Hegel sees world history as the record of objective spirit's development, of the progressive instantiation of broader and broader conceptions of freedom in political institutions. Nature, therefore, cannot be part of world history.

This distinction between progressive spirit and repetitive nature maps on to Hegel's distinction between historical and unhistorical peoples. Societies that are part of the movement of spirit are also part of history. They change, develop, and bequeath more advanced conceptions of freedom to their successors. Societies that do not participate in the development of spirit are part of nature rather than history. They are stable, repetitive, unchanging. Hegel famously summarizes world history as moving from East to West, driven by a developing understanding of freedom:

[F]irstly, that of the Orientals, who knew only that *One* is free, then that of the Greek and Roman world, which knew that *Some* are free, and finally, our own knowledge that *All* men as such are free, and that *man* is by nature free.⁷³

Societies that are part of this trajectory count as historical, while those outside it are relegated to an unhistorical, natural condition. Patricia Purtschert notes that when Hegel ends his discussion of Africa and moves on to Asia in the *Introduction* to his lectures on the philosophy of history, he characterizes this as a transition from nature to history. Africa need not be mentioned again, he says:

for it is an unhistorical continent, with no movement or development of its own. . . . What we understand as Africa proper is that unhistorical and undeveloped land which is still enmeshed in the natural spirit, and which had to be mentioned here before we cross the threshold of world history itself.⁷⁴

The parallels between Hegel and Jaspers here are striking. They have different criteria for classifying peoples as historical or unhistorical — contributing to the development of spirit on the one hand, participating in the axial advance on the other — but they both exclude the same regions from their accounts: sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and Australasia.⁷⁵ Jaspers sees non-axial peoples as both unhistorical and close to nature, saying that they

did not come to history, but collapsed at their first contact with the historical peoples . . . they were as though bound to the substratum of natural life, into which they continually threatened to slip back.⁷⁶

Non-axial peoples are outside the stream of history. For them to come under the influence of an axial culture is equivalent to being "drawn into history."⁷⁷

Like Hegel, Jaspers sees this unhistorical, natural condition as stable. He describes pre-axial cultures as being “preserve(d) . . . in icy rigidity.”⁷⁸ These societies existed during the period between “prehistory” and “history proper,” and displayed “strangely stable conditions which, after destructive catastrophe, tend to reconstitute themselves in their old form.”⁷⁹ Jaspers comments on their constancy and lack of “spiritual movement” in a way which is very reminiscent of Hegel.

The Eurocentrism of Hegel’s philosophy of history is not in doubt. Its critics argue that, beyond this, it offers a justification for racism and European colonialism.⁸⁰ Hegel endows historical societies with such enormous significance, such a metaphysical manifest destiny, that they can do as they please with unhistorical ones. “In contrast with the absolute right which [a historical nation] possesses as a bearer of the present stage of the world spirit’s development,” he says, “the spirits of other nations are without rights, and they, like those whose epoch has passed, no longer count in world history.”⁸¹ The European colonial empires are doing the work of spirit. By conquering and colonizing unhistorical societies, they are drawing them into world history; in Purtschert’s words, “the trajectory of spirit corresponds to the project of European colonialism.”⁸² Hegel explicitly endorses the French colonization of North Africa for this reason. The region “is not itself a theatre of world-historical events, and has always been dependent on revolutions of a wider scope.” It has only ever been part of world history in virtue of being occupied by historical peoples, from the Phoenicians to the Turks. They have done North Africa a service by dragging it out of the nature-like stasis of sub-Saharan Africa and into the movement of history. France is simply spirit’s latest agent. “This portion of Africa, like the Near East, is orientated towards Europe; it *should and must* be brought into the European sphere of influence, as the French have successfully attempted in recent times.”⁸³ Hegel’s support for European colonialism follows directly from his philosophy of history, with its crucial distinction between spirit and nature, the historical and the unhistorical.⁸⁴

Once again, there are close parallels between Jaspers and Hegel on this point. When axial cultures come into contact with non-axial ones, the latter are “drawn into history.” They become part of the “historically all-embracing” legacy of the axial transformation, even at the cost of extinction. At times, Jaspers’s argument marches in lockstep with Hegel’s. Consider their accounts of the colonization of the Americas. Hegel, like Jaspers, is fully aware of the level of violence involved — he notes in passing that “nearly seven million people have been wiped out” — but says that “America and its culture, especially as it had developed in Mexico and Peru . . . was a purely natural

culture which *had to* perish as soon as the spirit approached it.”⁸⁵ Compare this to Jaspers’s view of the colonization of non-axial Native Americans by axial Europeans. In the process of Europe “providing America with spiritual foundations,” the pre-Columbian civilizations “vanished before the mere presence of Western culture deriving from the Axial Period.”⁸⁶ Both authors assume that one section of humanity is the bearer of advanced thought, that this vanguard is justified in imposing itself on less advanced sections, and that the violence and destruction involved may be disregarded.

The difficulties that these Hegelian traces pose for Habermas, who wishes to use Jaspers’s axial age hypothesis as part of a project to address Eurocentrism in philosophy, are starting to become clear. The most serious problems, however, arise in the one area where Jaspers makes a conscious attempt to break away from Hegel: his account of China and India.

VI. Unhistorical History: China and India

The ambivalent position of China and India in Jaspers’s work perfectly illustrates his unsuccessful attempt to break away from Hegel’s philosophy of history. This, as we will see, has consequences for Habermas’s attempt to use the axial age hypothesis in his postsecular project.

For Hegel, China and India should belong to history. Spirit moves from East to West, and the “Oriental” civilizations possess a conception of freedom — that one person; namely, the ruler, is free. This is an early moment in the development of objective spirit, but it is part of it nonetheless. In practice, however, Hegel qualifies his account of China and India so heavily that they can only doubtfully be described as part of history. Robert Bernasconi argues that Hegel develops two concrete criteria for counting a society as historical. First, along with many other theorists, Hegel believes that “history” is composed not only of events (*res gestae*) but also of records of events (*historia rerum gestarum*). To be fully part of history, a society must keep reliable records.⁸⁷ Second, since Hegel understands history as the progressive instantiation of ever broader conceptions of freedom in political institutions, a historical society must possess a state.⁸⁸ Objective spirit finds its home in political institutions throughout its development; a stateless society is also unhistorical. The two criteria are connected, since states are usually reliable record-keepers.⁸⁹

On this basis, Bernasconi argues, Hegel disqualifies China and India from world history, even though they participate in the movement of spirit. Although China evidently has a state, it does not, according to Hegel, have reliable historical records that separate fact from myth. It therefore has an ambivalent status as both the

place where history begins and a place outside history. Hegel describes China in much the same way as he describes unhistorical societies, as natural and static. The history of China and its neighbors “is still predominantly unhistorical, for it is merely a repetition of the same majestic process of decline.” Empires and dynasties may rise and fall, but nothing comes of this — the same political and spiritual structures reappear. “Whatever innovation replaces what has been destroyed must sink and be destroyed in turn; no progress is made: and all this restless movement results in an unhistorical history.”⁹⁰ This is even more the case for India, which has neither a centralized state nor factual records. Despite being “rich in spiritual achievements of a truly profound quality,” India “nevertheless has no history.”⁹¹ Indian religions and philosophies have gone a step beyond those of China by developing a sense of inwardness, but this spiritual advance is marred, for Hegel, by the irrational presence of the caste system. As long as the caste rather than the individual is seen as the basic unit of humanity, a full conception of freedom cannot develop. Hegel’s view of the Eastern civilizations as static and natural as opposed to the progressive, historical West is well captured by his comments on Persia:

While China and India remain stationary, and perpetuate a natural vegetative existence even to the present time, [Persia] has been subject to those developments and revolutions, which alone manifest a historical condition.⁹²

Bernasconi concludes that “China and India are ultimately, in spite of the attention given them, counted no more worthy as objects of Mnemosyne than Africa.”⁹³ To the extent that they contribute to objective spirit’s development, Hegel counts them as part of world history. But in light of the limitations discussed above, he relegates them to a paradoxical “unhistorical history,” little different from the unchanging, natural state of Africa, America and the Pacific.

Jaspers openly rejects this view. He begins *The Origin and Goal of History* with a criticism of nineteenth-century philosophies of history that exclude the non-Western world,⁹⁴ and is explicitly opposed to the idea that Asian civilizations are static and “unhistorical,” in contrast to the dynamic, progressive West. Jaspers even argues that this distinction is, in fact, an ideological product of colonialism. Colonial administrators such as Lord Elphinstone reified the temporary imbalance of power between Europe and Asia, arguing that the Indus divided the historical West from the unhistorical East. European philosophers such as Hegel then gave these ideas theoretical respectability, grounding the distinction in an account of spirit.⁹⁵ By counting China and India as axial regions, Jaspers offers a direct challenge to this way of thinking. It

is all the more ironic, then, that Jaspers ultimately reproduces Hegel’s view of the Asian civilizations.

Consider Hegel’s comments on the spiritual advances of India. In India, he argues, abstract thought did manage to transcend social reality, in this case the reality of the caste system. But this transcendence could not be maintained:

The spirit does indeed ascend to the unity of God, but it cannot remain for long at this level. The transcendence of particularity is merely a wild and aimless movement which always sinks back to the point at which it began.⁹⁶

India was for a time part of spirit’s development, and thus of world history, but then fell back into an unhistorical and natural condition. In the same vein, Jaspers suggests that although the Asian civilizations made the axial transition, they later retreated from it. He speaks in terms of “the recession that has taken place in China and India since the seventeenth century,” which shows what might happen to humanity as a whole if it abandons the cognitive advance of the axial age: “Is not the problem of our destiny to avoid sinking back into the Asiatic matrix from which China and India *had also* raised themselves up?”⁹⁷

In a long footnote to this passage, Jaspers takes issue with Alfred Weber’s view that China and India have always had unchanging, mythological cultures. He argues that while this may be an accurate description of the pre-axial civilizations of the Indus and Hwang-ho valleys, the India and China of the axial age did experience “the transmutation of the magico-metaphysical into ethicism.” He agrees with Weber, however, that they later regressed to a pre-axial condition, exemplifying “the risk that having ascended into the unmagical, human, rational, above the demons to God, we may in the end sink back again into the magical and demonological.”⁹⁸ Both Jaspers and Hegel use the same image of “sinking back” to describe what they see as the Asian civilizations’ unsuccessful, unsustainable transition from static nature to historical spirit, or from pre-axial to axial thought. In both cases China and India occupy ambivalent positions, axial and pre-axial, simultaneously inside and outside world history. Even when he sets out to repudiate Hegel’s philosophy of history, with all its Eurocentric and colonialist implications, Jaspers mirrors it. China and India are discounted; the West, in the end, is the only axial region in the modern world.

Jaspers’s axial age hypothesis is thoroughly Hegelian, even at those points where he attempts to break away from Hegel’s philosophy of history. In the conclusion to this article, I will argue that this damages and ultimately threatens to undermine Habermas’s postsecular project.

VII. Conclusion

Two conclusions can be drawn about the axial age hypothesis and its place in Habermas's postsecular project.

First, the hypothesis is strikingly at odds with the spirit of the project as a whole. Habermas's goal is, broadly, decolonial. He wishes to rectify the excessive Eurocentrism of political theory, social theory, and philosophy. For him, this means undoing the unreflexive secularism of these disciplines: opening the public sphere to religious inputs, abandoning Weberian assumptions about the inevitable decline of religion, and overcoming the opposition between philosophical reason and religious faith. And yet, in his attempt to fulfill this third goal, he makes use of a theory that is almost as Eurocentric as Hegel's philosophy of history. In the process of arguing for his hypothesis Jaspers asserts that northern Asia, Africa and America "saw the birth of nothing of importance to the history of the spirit," that the colonization of the Americas amounted to supplying these continents with "spiritual foundations," and that China and India have "sunk back" into a mythical, pre-axial condition. These are not contingent instances of Eurocentrism. They are grounded in Jaspers's theory, which holds that only certain peoples at a certain point in time developed real human subjectivity, ethical thought and context-transcending reason. It follows that all other peoples lack these attributes. Jaspers makes much of the shared axial heritage of the human race, and how it can enable unconstrained communication — an idea which evidently appeal to Habermas. But this heritage is shared by only certain peoples, at certain points in time. In the modern era, according to Jaspers, only the West possesses this axial heritage. Is it possible to tackle philosophy's Eurocentrism using a theory like this? It is true that a philosopher can make use of a concept or hypothesis without endorsing every aspect of it. It is also true, however, that concepts have histories. Anyone engaged in making genealogical arguments must be aware of this.

Secondly, Habermas's use of the axial age hypothesis in the philosophical strand of his postsecular project threatens to undermine the success of the political strand. Habermas argues, as I noted in the introduction, that religious citizens of secular states feel alienated from the exclusively secular public sphere. On the one hand, they may not feel that laws based on secular reasons and arguments alone are legitimate; on the other, they suffer from having their identities split into public (secular) and private (religious) segments. His solution is to modify his original account of legal legitimation so as to allow citizens to contribute religious reasons and arguments to the informal public sphere of the media and civil society, provided that their contributions are "translated" into secular language before they make an impact on the formal public sphere of the state and legal

system. As a beneficial side-effect, these contributions enrich secular ethical discourse. Two of the background assumptions to Habermas's theory of postsecular deliberative democracy should be noted: first, that religious citizens are sufficiently rational to hold their beliefs reflexively; second, that religious traditions contain valuable ethical insights. Habermas's argument strongly implies that the right to contribute to the public sphere in religious language belongs to reflexive believers of *all* religions. Any believer, as characterized by Habermas, would suffer from having their identity split, and might see laws formulated on an exclusively secular basis as illegitimate. Regardless of *what* their religion is, as long as they are reflexive and accept the Habermas's translation proviso, they would have the right to contribute.

The logic of Habermas's postsecular political theory suggests that all religions are equal; but the logic of his major genealogical argument suggests that some religions are more equal than others. According to Jaspers's hypothesis, only those religions that emerged in Greece, Israel, India, and China between 800 and 200 BCE display the axial characteristics of context-transcending reason, fully human subjectivity, and so on. Thus Jaspers places Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism — and later religions which can plausibly be described as their "descendants," such as Christianity and Islam — on a higher cognitive level than any other traditions. Non-axial or pre-axial beliefs are part of the "magico-metaphysical" prehistory of the human race. Habermas's endorsement of the axial age hypothesis therefore creates an uncomfortable tension between the philosophical and political strands of his postsecular project. Do all religions have the capacity for reflexivity and reason that is necessary for contributing to the public sphere? Do they all have the potential to disclose ethical insights? Should some "primitive" religions be excluded from the public sphere?

This is not a trivial question. Consider the case of Hinduism. It is the third largest religion in the world, with over a billion adherents, most of them in India. And yet Hinduism is, by Jaspers's standards, a largely pre-axial belief system. There are three major sets of Hindu scriptures, the Vedas (Sanskrit hymns to Aryan gods), the Brahmanas (prose commentaries on the Vedas, emphasizing ritual and sacrificial procedures) and the Vedanta Upanishads (works of mystical philosophy in the form of poetic dialogues). It is generally agreed by historians that they were composed around 1400 BCE, 1000–800 BCE, and 600 BCE, respectively.⁹⁹ Jaspers refers to the Upanishads as axial texts at the beginning of *The Origin and Goal of History*,¹⁰⁰ but does not mention Hinduism again. His remarks about India's regression from an axial to a pre-axial condition, however, can be taken to indicate his view of the religion. For Jaspers, then, Hinduism is a largely pre-axial religion.

It represents for him the “magical and demonological” thinking of the period before the axial transformation rather than the rational and ethical thinking that flourished afterwards. This view is dictated by his hypothesis, which dates the beginning of full human subjectivity, ethical sensitivity and context-transcending reason to 800 BCE. Given that Habermas accepts the axial age hypothesis, should he therefore deny Hindus (and adherents of any other pre-axial or non-axial beliefs) the right to contribute to the public sphere in religious language? Needless to say, an attempt to overcome Eurocentrism in political theory that endorsed such a position would be self-defeating. The fact that this question can even be asked demonstrates the tension between the political strand of Habermas’s project, which is committed to equal treatment for reflexive religious believers and beliefs, and the philosophical strand, which, thanks to the axial age hypothesis, places some religions on a higher cognitive and moral level than others.

To the extent that it relies on the *major* genealogical argument, the philosophical aspect of Habermas’s postsecular project is beset by problems. The Eurocentric character of the axial age hypothesis undermines the anti-Eurocentric goal of the project as a whole, as well as creating a tension between the project’s political and philosophical strands. There is, however, a way out of these difficulties, and it lies with Habermas’s *minor* genealogical arguments.

Recall that Habermas identifies religious origins for many philosophical concepts: the Absolute, the ethical society, radical evil, and so on. The aim of these partial, piecemeal genealogical arguments is to show that philosophy has a long history of borrowing from religion, which allows Habermas to argue that philosophical reason should not be seen in exclusively secular terms, or in opposition to religious faith. This is the goal of the philosophical strand of his postsecular project. It can be achieved just as well, I suggest, by a series of relatively modest conceptual genealogies as by an ambitious, totalizing genealogy of philosophical reason as a whole. If Habermas is correct in arguing that Hegel’s concept of the Absolute or Kant’s concept of the ethical society derive ultimately from religious concepts such as God and the kingdom of heaven, then it is clear that philosophy and religion *do* have common ground. There is simply no need for him to make further speculative claims about the origin of reason and ethics — claims which, as I have shown, come with unfortunate Eurocentric baggage.

As well as fulfilling the goal of the philosophical strand of Habermas’s postsecular project just as effectively as the major genealogical argument, the minor genealogical arguments cohere much better with the project as a whole. Habermas’s ultimate aim in this context is to rid philosophy and political theory of their

Eurocentric assumptions, making them fit for purpose in a pluralistic world. A series of micro-genealogies of concepts is a better fit for this project than a macro-genealogy of philosophical reason. The minor genealogical arguments make no claim about which religious traditions from which parts of the world are cognitively and ethically “advanced,” which “primitive.” They erect no barriers around the public sphere. If anything, the minor genealogical arguments *complement* rather than *contradict* the political strand of the project, since the philosophical appropriation of religious concepts may serve as a model for the process of sacred-to-secular translation which Habermas sees taking place in the informal public sphere. At best, the minor genealogical arguments open up the possibility of an unconstrained dialogue between philosophical reason and religious faith, with decolonial implications.

Habermas limits his examples to appropriations by Western philosophers of concepts from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The list could easily be expanded, however, to include appropriations by religious traditions of philosophical concepts: consider the impact of Platonic ideas on early Christianity, and of Aristotle on Islamic thought. Equally, it could include appropriations that cross the cultural boundaries between the Western and non-Western worlds, as well as the genre boundary between philosophy and religion. In this context, consider Schopenhauer’s encounter with Buddhism; consider the work of Kyoto School philosophers such as Kitaro Nishida and Keiji Nishitani, who appropriated concepts both from Christianity and from post-Kantian German philosophy.¹⁰¹ Despite Jaspers’s and Habermas’s intentions, the major genealogical argument cannot help but place some religious traditions, some peoples and cultures, on a higher plane than others. A set of minor genealogical arguments that traced the histories of these concepts might be a more effective means of countering philosophy’s Eurocentrism than any argument that relies on the axial age hypothesis. Such piecemeal conceptual genealogies fit global pluralism well. They imply a situation in which (any) philosophical tradition is open to the exchange of concepts with (any) religious tradition — a glimpse, perhaps, of the postsecular condition that Habermas hopes to achieve.

NOTES

1. See Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” in *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

2. Jürgen Habermas, “What is Meant by a ‘Post-Secular Society’? A Discussion on Islam in Europe,” in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 61. See also Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the ‘Public Use of Reason’ by Religious and Secular Citizens,” in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 116–117.

3. Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," 103.
4. Habermas, "What is Meant by a 'Post-Secular Society,'" 62–63.
5. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 130–131.
6. Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," 109–111.
7. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 13–18.
9. *Ibid.*, 2.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 81. For an incisive criticism of several aspects of Jaspers's theory, see Anthony Black, "The 'Axial Period': What Was It and What Does It Signify?" *The Review of Politics* 70 (2008): 24–25.
13. John D. Boy and John Torpey, "Inventing the Axial Age: The Origin and Uses of a Historical Concept," *Theory and Society* 42 (2013): 245–246.
14. *Ibid.*, 247.
15. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).
16. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
17. Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: the Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York: Knopf, 2006).
18. Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to my Critics," in *Habermas and Religion*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 349.
19. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 142.
20. Jürgen Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," in *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 17.
21. Jürgen Habermas, "Fundamentalism and Terror," in *The Divided West* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 10–11.
22. Jürgen Habermas, "'The Political' — The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 18.
23. See Eduardo Mendieta, "Appendix: Religion in Habermas's Work," in *Habermas and Religion*, 405–406.
24. There are also several references to the hypothesis in his writings on social theory from the 1970s and 1980s. See Jürgen Habermas, "Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism," in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 151–152, and "History and Evolution," *Telos* 39 (1979): 37–38. See Boy and Torpey, "Inventing the Axial Age," 251.
25. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 142.
26. Jürgen Habermas, "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant's Philosophy of Religion," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 222–223, 229–230.
27. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 143. On this point see also Amy Allen, "Having One's Cake and Eating It Too: Habermas' Genealogy of Postsecular Reason," in *Habermas and Religion*, 138.
28. "To offer a genealogy," says Raymond Geuss, "is to provide a historical dissolution of self-evident identities." See "Genealogy as Critique" *European Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2002): 212. Habermas' arguments are genealogical in this sense — by tracing the history of philosophical reason and concepts, they seek to dissolve the apparently self-evident identity of philosophy as an exclusively secular discourse.
29. Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," 17–18.
30. Allen, "Having One's Cake and Eating It Too," 134.
31. *Ibid.*, 135–136, 139–140.
32. Jürgen Habermas, "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 118–119.
33. Jürgen Habermas, "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 43–44.
34. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
35. Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," 17. He had already made this argument in "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," 30, and "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices," 119.
36. Allen, "Having One's Cake and Eating It Too," 143–145. Paradox aside, Allen suggests that this may be at odds with Habermas's general hostility to contextualism, for example, in his debates with Gadamer and Foucault.
37. For Habermas's criteria of reflexive religious belief see "Religion in the Public Sphere," 137.
38. *Ibid.*, 141.
39. Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," 17.
40. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 143.
41. Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," 361.
42. See Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking," *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007): 2–3. Whether the goal of overcoming the legacy of European colonialism is best achieved by admonishing the secularist prejudices of Western philosophers, rather than by political action aimed at redressing the global balance is another question.
43. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 18–99. On this point see Jonathan Bowman, *Cosmopolitan Justice: The Axial Age, Multiple Modernities, and the Postsecular Turn* (Cham: Springer, 2015).
44. Jürgen Habermas, "The Conflict of Beliefs: Karl Jaspers on the Clash of Cultures," in *The Liberating Power of Symbols: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 31.
45. *Ibid.*, 43–44.
46. Jürgen Habermas, "The Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species," in *The Future of Human Nature*, 40.
47. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 142.
48. Habermas, "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge," 232.
49. *Ibid.*, 225–226.
50. Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," 110.
51. Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World" in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Figures*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (London: Routledge, 2004), 309.
52. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 143.
53. See for example, Maria Herrera Lima, "The Anxiety of Contingency: Religion in a Secular Age," in *Habermas and Religion*, 70.
54. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 51.
55. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
56. *Ibid.*, 12.
57. *Ibid.*, 44, 48.
58. *Ibid.*, 48.
59. Bjorn Thomassen, "Anthropology, Multiple Modernities and the Axial Age Debate," *Anthropological Theory* 10 (2010): 327.
60. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 22.
61. *Ibid.*, 72.
62. *Ibid.*, 7.
63. *Ibid.*, 7.
64. *Ibid.*, 23.
65. *Ibid.*, 44.

66. *Ibid.*, 27.
67. Boy and Torpey, 248.
68. *Ibid.*, 248.
69. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 83.
70. *Ibid.*, 61.
71. *Ibid.*, 126–127.
72. *Ibid.*, 41.
73. *Ibid.*, 54–55.
74. *Ibid.*, 190. See Patricia Purtschert, “On the Limits of Spirit: Hegel’s Racism Revisited,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (2010): 1046.
75. Hegel’s basis for this division is ultimately climatic. Spirit can only start to develop where consciousness separates itself from its immediate surroundings, i.e. nature, and becomes reflexive. Extreme climates impede this. Only the inhabitants of temperate zones, therefore, can participate in the movement of spirit and thus become historical peoples. See Hegel, *Introduction*, 154–155, and Purtschert, 1045.
76. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 72.
77. *Ibid.*, 7.
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*, 13.
80. On this point see Teshale Tibebe, *Hegel and the Third World: the Making of Eurocentrism in World History* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2011).
81. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, §§ 346–347.
82. Purtschert, “On The Limits of Spirit: Hegel’s Racism Revisited,” 1045.
83. Hegel, *Introduction*, 174 (my italics).
84. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel also makes an economic and ethical argument for colonialism. He claims that emigration to the colonies can provide an outlet for the disenfranchised *Pöbel* or “rabble” created by capitalism. By colonizing non-European lands they can acquire property of their own, thus undoing their alienation from ethical life and neutralizing the threat they might pose to the stability of the state. See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 269 (§ 248).
85. Hegel, *Introduction*, 163.
86. Jaspers, 44.
87. See Hegel, *Introduction*, 136.
88. *Ibid.*, 96.
89. Robert Bernasconi, “With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? on the Racial Basis of Hegel’s Eurocentrism,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22 (2000): 178–179.
90. Hegel, *Introduction*, 199.
91. *Ibid.*, 136.
92. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans John Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 173.
93. Bernasconi, “With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin?” 189.
94. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, xiv.
95. *Ibid.*, 52–53.
96. Hegel, *Introduction*, 200.
97. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 53, my italics.
98. *Ibid.*, 53 n. 5, 279.
99. See Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India (8th Edition)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 25, 43–48.
100. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 2–3.
101. See Kitaro Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

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