



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Power, History and Meaning: World Religions and Political Affairs

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*In conversation with **Erik Owens**, Associate Director
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OWENS: Your talk draws upon concepts of the Axial Age, a time understood to represent a shift in values from a focus on society to the individual. How do you see that shift and how does it relate to our present context, where Western individualism stands in contrast to strong traditions of more collectivist modes in Asia and elsewhere?

POLKE: Well, let me first say, thank you for the invitation. Second, I would emphasize that during the last few decades, the Axial Age thesis became an empirically tested hypothesis that showed not only a historical shift towards individualism, but also the emergence of a new form of universalism.

This universalism in its different cultural gestalts presented a new understanding of the individual as important within society and society as a whole. In this context, the Axial Age tension can also be used today to distinguish or to separate the failures of individualism from individualism as a whole, which is connected to a certain kind of humanistic universalism and a spiritual dimension.

There is a lot of discussion over whether e.g. the Greek Axial Age case is a spiritual one or not; or when it comes to Chinese thinking: is the Taoist more spiritual than the Confucian tradition? Or are they both something completely different and not secular in the modern sense of the word?

OWENS: Do you see the Confucian example as being meaningfully different from Indian, Greek, and other Chinese spiritual traditions, as it relates to the contemporary thrust?

POLKE: There is a specific connection between Confucianism and some of the political aspects of the Greek universalism. Both reflect and act within this world. The connection they share is not temporal causal, but rather a this-worldliness in thinking. It is quite different from serious forms of Buddhism or Taoism, which

more or less profess a spirituality of salvation and offer an understanding which brings the individual to the ultimate reality, which is an otherworldly reality.

OWENS: Despite, even, the Platonism that is at the core of Greek thought?

POLKE: Yes, but that's a big discussion. In contrast to Robert Bellah's more or less exclusive preference for Plato in his volume on the Axial Age, I would place more emphasis as well on Aristotle.

Interestingly enough, there are also analogies when it comes to the comparison between Confucius and Mencius as well. There is a more inner-worldly direction bringing out tensions between the moral order and the state that now factors into the discussion.

OWENS: Can you say a bit about the political structures that arose as a result of this thinking? How do they reflect this new mode of religious and philosophical thought?

POLKE: I think this is the first time in human history that political thinking holds meaning for the life of each individual and straddles everyday life for all, not just for the political leaders. This differs from politics in traditional societies and is a result of the Axial Age. Without this influence of politics on private life, you cannot understand how important civic discussions were. The conversations that took place in the agora, which is a basic model for modern democracy, is an example of this. When you read *Federalist Papers*, or some of the most important political thinkers during the American Revolutionary period, you see a reception of the old Greek and Roman thinking.

Think about the influence of Cicero on Jefferson's intellectual development. You see a discussion of political affairs using the agora as a model for the raising of a young American republic. This is a basic transformation in the mentality of what politics are all about. And it is a transformation which dates back to the Axial transformation in Old Greece.

OWENS: What is the importance to the Axial Age theory of the idea that these developments occurred independently around the world?

POLKE: Axial Age theory can give insight into how we can connect universalism in a non-static way. It argues that there is not only one narrative for universalism—for example 18th century Western Enlightenment—but several paths to different forms of universalism. The tendencies belong to the same family of human cultural development.

We can also say when we look at the specific contexts that there is progress. Not one progress for humankind in general, but several progresses in the evolution of

the human capacity to think along morally universal lines and to focus on the needs and on the rights of individuals within their own societies and cultures.

That is to some extent what Michael Walzer has in mind when he talks about iterative universalism as something that can be diagnosed during the cultural history of several societies. It is also important that there are several Axial Age cultures, but that not every society tends to such an Axial tension.

We can also fall back to the pre-Axial status of our society. This insight is important e.g. for Eric Voegelin's concept of political religion, or for what Ernst Cassirer wrote in his last book, *The Myth of the State*. There are crucial points in history in which a whole society or political system can fall back into a kind of mythological fusion of state between political thinking, spiritual order and moral actions. This is a state without universalism, without the tension between what is and what should be ought to be, and without any criticism of the status quo of a political order.

OWENS: How do the post-Axial developments of Christianity and Islam fold into the contemporary understanding that you have?

POLKE: Let's take the Islamic cultures. The Islamic and the Christian countries have similar tendencies in the core of their belief systems when dealing with the Axial tensions. For Islam, the oneness of Allah creates a universal tension. In Christianity, there are the doctrines of the two swords or the two kingdoms.

We know in both histories, of Islam as well as of Christianity, that there were periods in which this tension seemed to be abolished. But again, principally spoken there is always a fusion of the political and the religious. One can now discuss whether this tension is still alive after the loss of the Osmanic Empire and the emergence of new Arabic kingdoms in the Near East.

For example, let's take the dynasty in Saudi Arabia. Is this a case of axial tensions, or a kind of modern fusion of religion and politics used to legitimate one particular political order or shift towards Allah's governance?

So this would be one possible way to read contemporary religio-political history through the heuristic instruments of the Axial Age thesis. It is important to acknowledge that Islam and Christianity inherit this Axial tension from old Israelite history. And when it comes to questions of power, the first question should always be: are there any voices from within e.g. Muslim societies using other concepts in Muslim political thinking to criticize the fusion of axial thinking or not; and the same is true for Christianity.

OWENS: Thank you very much.