

Rethinking axially: Why the transcendence-immanence binary does not work for India

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An acknowledgement

These reflections on axially were originally written as part of a keynote address to be delivered at a Conference on Imagining culture(s), Undoing Disciplines, organized by the University of Miami Center for the Humanities (2011), which I was unable to attend. An abbreviated version was presented at a Round table on Religion and politics, organized by Manindra Thakur at the Centre for Political Studies of the Jawaharlal Nehru University on 19 November 2010. I am grateful for the response of many participants. When Monika invited me to contribute to a volume celebrating the work of Mukund Lath it struck me that this might accord well with his interests and exploration of *dharma saṃkaṭa* and of being and knowing in his most recent book, *Kyā hai, kya nahīn hai* (Lath 2004, 2009).

Taylor's magnum opus, *A secular age* (2009) throws open a challenge, how does one think about conditions of belief and secularity in the non west? Taylor's book is concerned with the West or the North Atlantic world whose roots lie in Latin Christendom but not with the worlds of the Indian Ocean or the Pacific. It raises for me the question of what were pre-modern "bulwarks of belief" and practice in the nonwest? What is the nature of religious imaginations of, say, India and China or the many universes comprising Arabic and Persian and the many vernaculars? What are the changing moments therein?

This paper explores in a preliminary fashion some issues concerning the changing religious imagination of the non west and its conceptual and temporal structure and is in that sense a prolegomenon. The nature of the religious imagination, the culture-power dynamic and the relationship between the religious and the secular undergoes a different trajectory in both India and China, two of the major non-western civilizations. What are also different are their conceptual grids.

What must be done prior to thinking the history of secularity in the non west is the task of cleaning the slate before it can be written anew. A starting point is to rethink the categories that are often invoked to analyze anOther topography of religion. In effect, three sets of categories have been used by social science to think about the culture/ power dynamic:

religious/secular

transcendent/immanent

sacred/profane

Interestingly, while most theorists accept the critique of religion/secular binary the new binary between transcendent/immanent has become something of a Kantian *a priori* and has been resurrected in the idea of axiality (Taylor 2009, Casanova 2009).

The axial splitting between the transcendent and the immanent is one of the core ontological assumptions invoked by several historical sociologists and political philosophers. This is an understanding grounded in the historical experience of the Abrahamic religions and of the North Atlantic world. It involves two core ideas - the split between the immanent and the transcendent and a new sense of time. The following argument challenges the temporal/typological framework that universalizes the axial age.

The revival of the idea of Axiality is associated with Shmuel N Eisenstadt. Reformulating an initial conceptualisation by Karl Jaspers he argued that the Axial age breaks through in the middle of first millennium BCE. Given the radically new idea of a transcendent God, kings could no longer claim to be gods. Instead it authorised prophets and priests.

With the disappearance of king-god, a new model of the secular ruler appeared, accountable to a higher order or authority, to God and divine law.

Axiality helped shape the Great World Religions and the classical empires. It accomplished what Jaspers calls the transition from mythos to logos and Cassirer, the limits of mythical thinking (Eisenstadt 1986). Jaspers had built on Alfred Weber's idea of a "real uniformity within the Eurasian bloc." He identified a religious and philosophical questioning in Asiatic-Greek civilisation (subsuming Zoroastrian religion, Jewish prophecy and Greek philosophy involving Persians, Jews and Greeks who accomplished a breakthrough by questioning the "magistic" worldview) and in India and China (with Confucianism and Buddhism, described as secondary arenas) (Arnason 2005). Jaspers saw India and China alongside the West, rather than Egypt and Babylonia. Jaspers' thesis was projected as an alternative to Christian and post-Christian philosophies of history suggesting that Greek and Jewish sources were crucial to western traditions. Among the problems with his work was that he saw nomads as "barbarian peripheries to civilizational centers" suggesting an implicit theory of progress.

In a relatively recent work that Eisenstadt gave me when I visited him in Jerusalem in 2010, (some months before his passing away) he referred to "multiple patterns in modernity," but not of axiality (subsequently published as Eisenstadt 2011). The Florence Conference that debated the idea of axiality had, however, highlighted the need to think about multiple axialities involving the Greek, Jewish, Indian and Chinese traditions (Arnason et al 2005).

Eisenstadt points out the tensions in the internal structure of Axial visions: inclusivist universalist claims and an exclusivist tendency. The idea of the Axial Age, he maintains, constitutes a revolutionary process that has shaped the course of history and is a challenge to sociological theory (Eisenstadt 2011). He also invokes Bellah who had suggested a transition from archaic modes of thought to the historic religions. For Bellah there was a close association between religion and the transcendental ("the historic religions are all in some sense transcendental") and represent a theoretical stage of human thinking or reflexivity. He maintains that this became a basic, predominant and hegemonic premise of cultural programs and institutional formations within a society or civilisation.

In Eisenstadt's view the revolutionary markers of the axial age rupture are explicit,

They include a broadening of horizons, or an opening up of potentially universal perspectives, in contrast to the particularism of more archaic modes of thought; an ontological distinction between higher and lower levels of reality; and a normative subordination of the lower level to the higher, with more or less overtly stated implications for human efforts to translate guiding principles into ongoing practices. In other words, the developing Axial visions entailed the concept of a world beyond the immediate boundaries of their respective settings - potentially

leading to the constitution of broader institutional frameworks, opening up a range of possible institutional formations....(Eisenstadt 2011).

Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock emphasise the idea of a historical period with defined structural aspects; of radical cultural transformation in several major civilisations that experienced major rupture; and elaborated new models of order - implying a shift from particularism and archaic to an opening up of potentially universal perspectives (Arnason et al 2005). They contrast the axial model with older civilisational theory in that it does not view civilisations as closed worlds. Eisenstadt's concluding statement in the volume emphasizes relations between axial and non-axial civilisations such as Japan. Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock mention that the axial model draws on Max Weber but avoids his emphasis on particular religious traditions and dismissive treatment of others, in particular the ways in which Weber minimized inner conflicts of Chinese traditions and its transformative potential. They also acknowledge that the models of Jaspers and Eisenstadt are dependent on assumptions of Greek and Jewish versions of axially, particularly the distinction between the transcendental and mundane.

To be fair, Assmann critiques traditional conceptions of axially particularly the illusion of a "mysterious synchrony" and points out that there have been older and also later moments of axially as when Akhenaten initiated a monotheistic revolution in Egypt in the 14th century BCE (2008). There is also the question of whether Zoroaster belongs to an axial or a preceding moment.

As one looks at India axially becomes highly problematic. Let us begin with the question of how historical sociologists and theorists conceive of axially. Jan Heestermaan views the Vedic sacrifice as the starting-point of an axial transformation in India, viewing the ritual system concerned with order. But a far larger number of scholars identify the *śramana* traditions and specifically Buddhism as constitutive of axially.

Taylor, however, takes a different position. He identifies the transcendent/immanent distinction as "foundational" in defining religion for our culture and refers to the "Axial Age" as an extraordinary period when "higher" forms of religion appeared seemingly independent in different civilizations, marked by founding figures as Confucius, Gautama, Socrates, [and] the Hebrew prophets" (2009, 16, 151).

Taylor views axially as a transformative moment that articulates the idea of a higher human good. It involves personae such as monks, sages and renouncers and institutions in that it undercuts the "pagan"; just as the *saṅgha* undermines the *brahman*. Axially initiates "a break in all three dimensions of embeddedness: Social order, cosmos, human good." Taylor acknowledges that Buddhism radically undercuts the cosmos but does not see it as undermining the idea of transcendence. What is problematic is his conception of Buddhist *nirvāṇa* as a "beyond or outside" of the cosmos. If the cosmos is undercut how can *nirvāṇa* be an outside? With respect to Latin Christendom, he maintains that the process is completed only in the sixteenth century

(Taylor 2011). "Or if it remains cosmic, it loses its original ambivalent character, and exhibits an order of unalloyed goodness, as with the 'Heaven', guarantor of just rule in Chinese thought, or the order of Ideas of Plato, whose key is the Good."

More recently, Bhargava (draft) has identified in the Ashokan inscriptions the idea of the common good articulated in the idea of *dhamma*, which marks, he maintains, a radical break with the Vedic (*vaidika*). The argument leaves several questions unanswered.

Is the Vedic only about transactions between men and gods for material gains - ie, the idea of sacrifice exclusively as propitiating the gods? Does the Vedic not also offer clues to transcendental morality (as distinct from ethics)? Further, does the Buddhist moment mark a break with the past or does it conjoin with another past? The argument raises further issues. How is difference marked between the *brāhmaṇa* and the *śramaṇa*? What is the nature of the later dialogue between the two? Is the Vedic being conflated with the brahmanical?

The *śramaṇa* traditions, as Pande demonstrates, predate the Vedas. *Śramaṇa* (*śrama*) came from moral exertion and countered the yajña-centric or sacrifice-centred worldview. Both Buddhism and Jainism represented continuity with the pre-Vedic and are also "deeply influenced by Vedic thought." "The fashionable view regarding Buddhism as a Protestant Vedicism and its birth as a Reformation appears to be based on a misreading of later Vedic history caused by the fascination of a historical analogy and the ignorance or neglect of Pre-Vedic-civilization" (Pande 1957, 317). Joshi cites G. C. Pande, H. Zimmer and H. L. Jain on the non-Vedic and non-Aryan origin of Buddhism, Saṅkhya-Yoga and Jainism. Joshi points out that even before the Upaniṣads and the Buddha there were non-Vedic and non-Brahmanic sages and ascetics. He maintains, "Buddhism and the non-Brāhmaṇic thought of the Upaniṣads belong to the non-Aryan and pre-Vedic Indian cultural tradition" (1970, 12). He builds on Pande's argument pointing to the Harappan influence in the culture of *munis* and *śramaṇas*. We need to remember that Śakyamuni was predated by 6 Buddhas. Joshi, however, differs from Pande's position on the impact of Vedic thought on the Buddha.

Pannikar quotes a Ṛgvedic hymn (X, 136) dedicated to the *muni* or silent ascetics who is a with *keśin* (long loose hair) and who consume *viś* (poison), as Siva does:
Within him is fire, within him is drink,
within him both earth and heaven.
He is the Sun which views the whole world,
he is indeed Light itself--
the long-haired ascetic.

There is mention also of the Vratyas, those who don't follow ritual. They are called yatis in the *Brahmanās* (Pande 2011). The *yatis* and *munis* in Saṅkhya Yoga, Jainism, Ajivism do not recognize the Veda. It was only later with Patanjali (200 CE) that yoga was turned into a theistic system.

The *vaidika/sramaṇaka* is hardly the equivalent of the “archaic”/Abrahamic. The Ṛgveda is no archaic/pagan given the ideas of *śāntī*, *ṛta* and *ṛiṅ* expressive of conceptions of the cosmos, order and human good. *Ṛta* and *satya* provide the cosmic foundation of the universe and may be apprehended by *tapas* or disciplined ‘seeking’ or *sādhana* and realized through them (Krishna 2011).

Bhargava cites Crangle as suggesting that early Vedic practices involve "a worldly attitude whereby the worshipper seeks to appease gods by performing ritual sacrificial ceremonies." Crangle and Bhargava seem to approach the Vedic tradition from the outside contrasted with say, Panikkar, who attempts to understand it from within. It is interesting that they cite the “otherness” within Vedic belief describing those who were opposed to Aryan rituals as "unbelievers, riteless people."

Bhargava sees the Buddha as offering a different conception of Dharma, not for personal or collective self-fulfilment but to make easier a common life of a diverse society. It offers a "transcendental point from which one examines the cosmos" and from this emanates a moral vision, which makes a profound restructuring of society and polity possible. He cites Thapar’s view of the sixth century as a "century of universal questioning." Moreover, Buddha's teachings opened up the possibility of the radical socio-political restructuring of the world and the self by politico-moral action from above. Buddha's ethic included the pivotal importance of moral action."

Bhargava builds on Kosambi who highlights not only the personal conversion of emperor but of the entire state apparatus. Aśoka inaugurates the new idea of the Cakravartin, the wheel turner, the upholder of dharma who is intrinsic to the social and moral order of the world. The 7th edict is an attempt to tame the institution of kingship and to contain the absolute exercise of power. Dhamma is not virtue, religious truth or piety, but akin, as Obeyesekere and Tambiah have pointed out, to transcendental morality.

The two moments of Śākyamuni and Aśoka thus become conflated in Bhargava’s argument. The problem is also that the past is understood through a contemporary lens. Bhargava offers a view of "religion" based on mutual exclusion. One may well ask also what is the extent to which contemporary categories such as "hate speech" can be superimposed on the past? Can the polemics between sufis and yogis or that between different sufi lineages or between the brahmans and bhikkus be called “hate speech”?

It is the *Upaniṣads*, Bhargava concludes, that provide the axial turn, the birth of the idea of radical transcendence and therefore of a duality between this world (*saṃsāra*) and *brahman* or *atman*, the ultimate reality pervading the whole universe or our deepest inner, imperishable selves. *Mokṣa* is liberation (*mukṭi*) from the cycle of *saṃsāra*, achieved through *jñāna*, inner, intuitive knowledge. But does the upaniṣadic signify duality or a non-dual perspective (see on this Gandhi 1984).

The question to be asked is whether the upaniṣadic texts are not part of the “Vedic experience,” as Pannikar puts it. Clearly the idea of axiality runs into problems with respect to Indian typologies and temporalities. It superimposes categories based on the semitic experience on other cultures and civilizations and can hardly be seen as a universal.

Indeed, both India and China suggest trajectories that challenge the transcendent/immanent binary. China defines understanding in terms of religion as belief in “transcendent.” Both Buddhism and Confucianism are its denial - in Buddhism there was only the constantly changing immanent and as for Confucianism the binary itself became irrelevant. Indeed, an immanent-transcendent holism is what would seem more apt.

In India there are theistic systems that refer to a causal God, but there are others in which the idea of the divine is transcausal and acosmic. Shlomo Biderman’s critique of axiality and the transposition of “transcendence” is particularly interesting as it comes from a scholar deeply grounded in both Judaic and Indian philosophies. Strangely enough, none of the Axial Age theorists have responded to him. Biderman contrasts transcendence in two cultures, European and Indian pointing out that the presupposition of transcendence (where presupposition means an assumption) is rooted in the West’s philosophical and religious framework going back to the ancient Greeks as in Plato’s theory of Forms (less adequately called theory of Ideas). It establishes “the ontological precedence of the outward over the inward, exteriority over interiority, the universal over the particular, transcendent over the immanent” (Biderman 2008, 18; the subsequent page numbers in parentheses are citations from this work).

Biderman cites Heinrich Heine’s argument that the prominence given to the presupposition of transcendence in the West came from the “fusion of the Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysical assumption and Judeo-Christian religious belief in a transcendent personal God” (23). He points out the enormous irony in that Plato and Aristotle transcend pagan “ancient Greek merriment.” Mythic worlds of stories of the exploits of the Gods would only later be invoked by Nietzsche’s Dionysius. Heine castigates these Greek philosophers for failing to defend Hellenism or “the Greek way of feeling and thinking” (24). Christianity followed Judaism in instituting transcendence as the foundation of culture promoting a worldview that is “dismal, emaciated, ascetic, over-spiritual” (24). Biderman comments on the “common knowledge that the three forms of western monotheism share *between* them a belief in the existence of a divine being. But it is less commonly observed that this belief is deeply rooted in a common conceptual bedrock...[which is] the presupposition of transcendence.” “This is a presupposition about God’s exteriority, His outwardness, His being different, the total ‘Other’, unlike any other being” and “His complete contrariness to both nature and human beings” (24-5). Biderman acknowledges exceptions such as the Stoics and Neoplatonists, but even when Godhead is depicted in immanent terms it is grounded in transcendence.

The presupposition of transcendence, Biderman argues, continues to play a "constitutive role within Western religious languages....Transcendence *precedes* both belief and practice by virtue of being a 'mental paradigm', that "draws a clear-cut demarcation between interiority and exteriority and sees this demarcation as being essentially asymmetrical-positing a clear precedence of exteriority over interiority, of the objective over the subjective" (27). The word *sacred*, is derived from Latin *sacrare*, meaning to set apart as holy, to consecrate.

Transcendence is not necessarily linked to monotheism, Biderman points out. Indeed, the Biblical world could be called henotheism, as Max Muller did, with God as supreme among a plurality of gods. The Exodus states, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Philosophical interpretations view God as non-corporeal, non-material, singular, abstract although there are attempts also to endow God with corporeal form, as anthropomorphic and with attributes. The presupposition of transcendence is whether God is portrayed as an abstract being, formless and incorporeal or as personal with qualities. Biderman highlights the violent and vehement rejection of different forms of idolatry. Jan Assman terms this family of religions as counter-religion since they reject anything opposing them, referring to such alternatives as paganism, heresy or idolatry (42). They are constantly compromised by Jewish midrashic, kabbalistic and Hasidic literature, Meister Eckhart and forms of Sufism in the attempt to bridge the "yawning abyss," as Gershom Scholem puts it, between God and man (50).

Indian philosophical and religious milieus do not put the presupposition of transcendence at the center as suggested by two millennia of Indian thought, Biderman argues. Divinity is not considered "something *essentially* different from the world and as something that has ontological precedence over man and the world" (52). Hasidism and Indian devotionalism are not similar, unlike what Buber thought.

In the Vedic tradition, ritual/sacrifice is very different from the paradigmatic Abrahamic sacrifice of Cain/Abel or of Abraham. Humans along with gods and sacrificial activity are subject to cosmic order. Ritual is attributed a cosmic role, ritual creates the world and preserves it and there is an autonomy of the ritual act that makes gods dependent on the seers. Between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE an internalisation of ritualistic activity occurs. The ritualistic act is perceived as a "unique act of creation: man upholds the cosmos through his ritualistic activity (and, alongside that, by means of his linguistic activity, he preserves the Vedas, the framework of the cosmos, by performing them)" (Biderman 58–59).

The second instance of the absence of the presupposition of transcendence is in the idea of *atman*. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad's* conception, If a man knows 'I am Brahman' in this way, he becomes this whole world. Not even the gods are able to prevent it, for he becomes their very self (*atman*). So when a man venerates another deity, thinking, 'He is one, and I am another', he does not understand....The gods, therefore, are not pleased at the prospect of men coming to understand this" (Biderman 60). 'I am brahman' reverses the relationship between man and god, makes gods

dependent on the knowing self. God is different from man, but not an "other." "Idolatry" and the idea of "heresy are integral conceptions of Western monotheism that are alien in this context.

The *śramaṇa* traditions also deny the idea of the transcendent. In Buddhism there is no notion of divinity and the idea of *īśvara* is denied. It would reject Plato's assumption that true reality is "out there" beyond the cave (that is, beyond phenomenal life), Biderman points out (53). From Nagarjuna (150 AD) there is a radical critique of all *pramaṇās* regarding their capacity to grasp the nature of ultimate reality (see Krishna 2000, ch 3). On the other hand over the years folkloristic Buddhism adopts a significant part of the Indian pantheon.

The notion of *pratītyasamutpāda* is translated as "dependent arising" also co-arising or "interdependent arising" ie, that phenomena arise together in a mutually interdependent web of cause and effect, which is what the Buddha awakened to. What is denied here is a theory of creationism or origins in the assertion that any phenomena exists only because of the existence of other phenomena in an incredible complex web of cause and effect covering time past, time present and time future. This is symbolized by the Indrajal or multidimensional spider's web on which lie dew drops or jewels reflecting all other dew drops.

In *pratītyasamutpāda* everything depends on everything else, all things are conditioned and transient (*anicca*), have no real independent identity (*anatta*) and thus do not truly exist as entities though the ordinary mind perceives them as such. Knowledge/wisdom (*prajña*) is to "see things as they are" (*yathā-bhūta-nana-dassana*) and that all phenomena is insubstantial and empty (*śūnya*) and thence to renounce desire and attachment, cultivate awareness and understanding and transcend the conditioned realm of form through buddhahood. Nagarjuna, the most important representative of the Madhyamika school of Buddhism, rejects both monistic and dualistic accounts of causation and explains *śūnyata* (emptiness) of causality by demonstrating the interdependence of cause and effect.

I conclude this discussion with a further set of questions to the proponents of axiality. What are the indices, the minimalist agenda, in other words, what conditions will disprove the idea of axiality or certify its non-existence?

Is it the case that axiality obfuscates what might be important inter-civilizational differences?

Does the idea of prophetic revelation and God and of priests mark difference or sameness?

Is criteria of justification and legitimation of the social and political order different in India and China?

The question is as to whether there was one axial turn or many such turns, the R̥gveda constituting one, the Upaniṣads another, and the Buddha and Mahavira yet another.

Akka Mahadevi, Kabir, Nanak and Mira being moments in the “medieval” followed by the great modern sages among them being Ramkrishna Paramhans, Sri Aurobindo, Narayana Guru and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. But in that case the idea of the Axial Age Revolution is so watered down, as to be rendered virtually useless!

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