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MAX WEBER ON RELIGIONS AND CIVILIZATIONS

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Spiteful Zeus: The Religious Background to Axial Age Greece

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Robert Bellah, in his recent survey of Axial Age societies,¹ devotes a chapter to the religious underpinnings of Greece that allowed for the Axial transformation in Greek thought. In contrast to the older societies of the Ancient Near East, which had long-standing traditions of political centralization and an elaborate religious establishment, Ancient Greece underwent a different development that enabled it to construct a unique religious culture which, in turn, allowed for the emergence of a more secular, human oriented outlook, or ‘this worldly’ orientation (Eisenstadt 1986: 29). The circumstances that led to the appearance of the Axial Age phenomenon in Classical Greece were partly due to the historical development of Greece as a peripheral economic and cultural entity, which stood aside from the older civilizations of the Ancient Near East and Egypt, and were also dependant on the specific social, political, economic, and religious characteristics of the fifth-century BCE Hellenic world. However, the groundwork for the Greek cultural phenomenon was set in the preceding historical eras.

Traditionally, Greece developed as an outlier of the eastern Mediterranean world and, for the most part, was largely ignored by its more powerful neighbors to the east and south, however archaeology confirms that Greece was always heavily influenced by these same complex societies. For most of their history, the Hellenes conducted extensive trade with their neighbors by exporting agricultural products and raw materials in exchange for not only finished goods, but also artistic and architectural motifs, weaponry and military technology, and even gods and mythology. Archaeology also demonstrates that Greece tended to be the poorer cousin of her neighbors and consistently lagged behind the Ancient Near East in almost every development. Thus, agriculture came millennia later (ca. 7000 BCE) to the Greek peninsula after its original appearance in the Levant,

1. Bellah (2011), 324-98; The concept of an Axial Age was originally formulated by Karl Jaspers (1955), however Joas (2012: 17) notes that “...Max Weber has to figure prominently in any serious reconstruction of this debate.” Although Weber never used the term ‘Axial Age’ he did note “... Greek and Indian parallels to the Hebrew prophets.”

and the overall productivity of the Greek economy was always less than that of Egypt, Mesopotamia, or even Anatolia. Indeed, drawing upon information from Homer, Weber (1976: 147) noted that “agricultural techniques were stabilized at a rather primitive level and thereafter did not develop.” Consequently Greek population levels never approached those of the more powerful states of the eastern Mediterranean, a fact which not only acted as a brake on the wealth and growth of Greece but also mitigated against the possibility of any single native Hellenic population developing enough economic and military power to overwhelm all other Greeks and force them into a single, unifying imperial state.

The consequence of these facts is that Greece was never an integral part of the Near Eastern world and never formed a part of any of the expansionist empires of the Bronze Age or even the early Iron Age. Geography surely played a role in Greece’s relative isolation but even geographical barriers can be overcome if the need is perceived to be great enough. The reason no one attempted to invade and conquer Greece before the fifth century BCE was simply because it was not deemed important or worthwhile enough to justify the expense and effort. Greece was a historical backwater and, because of its relatively marginal importance, was left on its own to develop free from the domination of an overarching imperial state that could impose a stultifying political and religious ideology for the purposes of ensuring conformity. Instead, Greece would be left free to develop as a group of independent states that collectively had a strong sense of Hellenic cultural and religious unity, but politically would remain decentralized and successfully resist any attempts at political unification until the Macedonian conquest of the late fourth century BCE. This historical development is significant for the heritage of world civilizations because Greece was not destined to remain a backwater but would instead export its own unique and vibrant culture and give the societies hovering around the Mediterranean coastline a distinct Hellenic flavor with long-term consequences for the future development of European and World culture.

One of the problems in unraveling the historical circumstances that led to Axial Age Greece is the limited nature of the evidence we have to chart Greece’s transition from a relatively prosperous society in the Bronze Age (1700-1100 BCE) to a backwater in the Dark Age (1100-800 BCE), and then reemerging as a dominant cultural and economic force in the Archaic period (800-500 BCE), the age of the *polis*, probably the most significant development in the history of the Mediterranean. For the Greek Bronze Age, we have only archaeology and a limited body of contemporary documents to confirm the existence of a splendid, wealthy complex society based upon a palace culture dominated

by a warrior elite that suddenly comes to an end in the 12th century BCE. Aside from the occasional records left by chance on the Linear B tablets, many of which contain some significant historical details, we have as our only literary account of the period the Homeric poems. Although scholars still dispute as to what extent the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are a reliable reflection of the time period they purport to portray, there are many incidental details contained in these poems that confirm what we know to be true about Mycenaean Greece from both archaeology and the Linear B tablets. We now know definitively that the gods invoked during the Classical period were already present in force during the Bronze Age, but the ways in which they were worshipped differed from the forms of the later historical period, most notably in the absence of temples or even cult statues. The names of the more familiar Homeric gods are recorded on the Linear B tablets, although it is not clear that they had the same level of importance or ranking as in the subsequent Archaic era. It is also clear that the dialect of the Linear B tablets is fairly uniform despite being found in three significant caches scattered over different geographic areas (Crete and the Peloponnese). This, however, does not imply that there was uniformity in language in the different regions of the Mycenaean world, and it is certain that the linguistic variety that would characterize later historic Greece, along with its attendant ethnic diversity, was already present.²

The rise of the *polis* in the eighth century BCE was accompanied by an expansion of the Greek world to all corners of the Mediterranean (Boardman 1999). The colonization movement in large part was a natural outgrowth of the Greek people's increased level of participation in trade during this era. Indeed, it is likely that the greater portion of the Hellenic population took an active role in commerce by either raising cash crops for export, boarding ship and moving merchandise to various ports, or even emigrating and permanently settling in a colony, thereby becoming importers and consumers. A small farmer could supplement his income by going to sea during those times of the year when there was not much to do on the farm, and Hesiod (ca. 750 BCE) suggests that this was a fairly common practice among the Greeks of his day, and was even typical of many American farmers living along the eastern seaboard of North America throughout the colonial and early national periods. The comprehensive nature of all these commercial activities would fall under Weber's definition of capitalism in Antiquity: "Where we find that property is an object of trade and is utilized by individuals for profit-making enterprise in a market economy,

2. Taylour (1995), 113-34; 153-4; Chadwick (1970), 34-80, 101-33; _____ (1976), 70-83, 190-1; Hall (1997), 1-16; 143-81.

there we have capitalism. If this be accepted, then it becomes perfectly clear that capitalism shaped whole periods of Antiquity, and indeed precisely those periods we call ‘golden ages’” (1976: 51).

The average Greek became an entrepreneur and a small businessman, and the very business of engaging in commerce required literacy in order to draw-up contracts and bills of lading (Powell 1991). This need led to the direct adoption of the Phoenician writing system by the Greeks, first for business purposes and secondly for writing literature. The major refinement the Greeks added to this script – the adaptation of some of the symbols to represent vowels – transformed this writing system into an alphabet which not only allowed for a greater range of literary texts to be written, especially poetry, but also promoted a greater level of literacy among the population at large. This was a significant milestone for the later appearance of the Axial Age in Greece as Greece itself became more of a middle class society than its Mediterranean neighbors.³

Middle class Greeks had greater access to literacy which ultimately meant intellectual speculation was not confined to a small, privileged elite. One well-known example, Socrates, was famously not counted among the economically advantaged in Athens as the Athenian democracy promoted a greater level of civic engagement among all classes of its citizens, more so than any other state in antiquity.⁴ Thinking, questioning, arguing, and speculating was encouraged. Logic and eloquence were needed to sway voters in the assembly. Intellectual discourse was not confined to the priestly caste, as it was in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and this is significant. Literacy in these latter societies only served as a bolster to the traditional religious underpinnings of the state, which was to provide a justification for the prevailing political order and the rule of a divine or semi-divine monarch who was believed to be either a god or the one mortal

3. The term *hoi mesoi* or *to meson* (‘the middle ones’) is used by Aristotle (*Pol.* 4.1289b 28-32; 1295b 2-8; 1296a 9-24) to discuss the class of small farmers that formed the bulk of the active citizen body of the polis and the backbone of the hoplite phalanx. Scholars (Morris 1989: 197-8; Finley 1983: 10-11) usually translate *hoi mesoi* to mean ‘middle class,’ however this does not imply that this class formed the greater portion of the free population of a polis. Different Greek communities had different social organizations (eg. Sparta vs. Athens) and used different terminology to mean specific things, and *hoi mesoi* is used by Aristotle as a generic term for what we would call middling or yeoman farmers. This term could also include Greeks, such as *metics* (resident foreigners), who were originally exclusively engaged in commerce but later gained citizenship rights by either grant or by purchasing land to gain entry into the hoplite class. Scholars also disagree as to who should be included in the *hoi mesoi* category but I am following Hanson’s interpretation (1999: 106-8) which characterizes them as a rising class of middling farmers who stand between the wealthier aristocracy and the much larger number of landless freemen. Classes in Greek society were not static and individuals could rise or fall in their economic station.

4. Hansen (1991). Raaflaub (2005), 264, estimates that as much as half of the citizen population of 50-60,000 actively participated.

chosen by heaven to rule in its stead. The populations of the Ancient Near East were largely agrarian with most of the people being illiterate peasants usually bound under some form of compulsory labor. The small percentage of the population engaged in commerce or manufacture who would have had access to writing were not present in significant numbers to give rise to a middle class, thinking class. This was also due to the fact that they would have had no political outlet as these societies were largely ruled by monarchs supported by an official bureaucracy and a religious establishment controlled by a hereditary priestly class (Weber 1976: 78-9). As we noted, the priests would have little interest in speculation or challenging the prevailing world view. Even Persian Zoroastrianism, which certainly influenced the Ionian school of thinkers had, by the sixth century BCE, come under the domination of the Magi, the traditional priestly order of the Medes. Many of the surviving Zoroastrian texts that are dated to this period consist mainly of lists of ridiculous laws and impossible punishments which would suggest that Persian and Near Eastern philosophical thinking was at a standstill.⁵

One of the reasons for the intellectual stagnation of the older cultures of the eastern Mediterranean was the rise of a succession of imperial states. Since the eighth century BCE, the Near East was in the process of being engulfed by the aggressive and backward-looking Assyrian empire, to be supplanted, in turn, by the Neo-Babylonian (612-536 BCE) and Achaemenid Persian empires (550-336 BCE). All these empires heavily regulated their respective economies in order to more efficiently harvest resources for the upkeep of the state, and used the traditional religious cultures of their subjects to bolster the legitimacy of the imperial power structure. In contrast Greece, since it was out of the reach of these imperial states, was experiencing its 'hothouse' period, for it was during this time that all the essential ingredients of Classical Greek civilization simultaneously emerged fully formed, like Athena, from the proverbial brow of Zeus. In addition, the entry of Persian power into the Hellenic world would have ramifications for the later intellectual history of fifth-century BCE Greece. During the sixth century BCE, the Persians brought the Greek cities along the Asia Minor seaboard (Ionia) under their control. The Persians preferred to rule their conquered peoples through viceroys (*satraps*), and so they established one-man rule in all the individual cities of Ionia. The repressive political climate

5. A major factor in the Axial transformation of the Near East was the coming of the Persians and the introduction of Zoroastrian dualism to the older cultures. It is believed to have had a profound impact on Post Exilic Judaism and definitely influenced the Presocratic philosophy of the Ionians, thereby providing the seed for Axial Israel and Greece. See Boyce (1982).

imposed by these Persian-backed tyrants led to an exodus of poets, writers, and intellectuals to the more appreciative communities of the Greek mainland, most of all Athens.

The frenetic, productive energy that characterized the Hellenic peoples during the Archaic era also stands in stark contrast to the deep somnolence of the immediately preceding Greek Dark Age, known for its poverty and chronic underdevelopment (Morris 2000: 202-7). It was as if the Greek world had suddenly awakened from centuries of slumber and burst upon the Mediterranean scene with all the essential political, cultural, religious, and economic features of Hellenic life fully set in place. Why did the Greek world suddenly emerge so dramatically upon the world stage? Scholars of this period have often noted the interaction of many circumstantial factors which collectively contributed to this development. Among the most important of these factors was a spike in population growth coupled with a dramatic increase in the level of trade contact with the Near East. The Phoenicians acted as the chief intermediaries between the Near East and Greece and, by following in their wake, the Greeks established colonies in all corners of the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, which acted as an additional spur for population growth and economic expansion.⁶ It was also through Phoenician agency that the Greeks adopted the writing system that was used to generate the earliest works of Western literature. This development is especially significant for charting the intellectual development of Greece as the literature of this time provides us a window onto some of the distinctive features of Greek religious life that allowed for the eventual development of a more secular outlook.

The Homeric poems are the very earliest Greek writings to survive thanks to the adoption of the Greek alphabet during Homer's lifetime (c. eighth century BCE). In fact, it is likely that the chief incentive for developing the alphabet was to commit his poems to writing (Wade-Gery 1952: 6-14; Powell 1991: 221-37). For our purposes, the most important feature of Homer's work is his portrayal of the Olympian gods with all the essential attributes and personalities that would forever be associated with them. Even more important is the depiction of the relationship between gods and humans which is uniquely Greek. In contrast to the religion of the Mesopotamians, which placed gods and mortals in an uneasy symbiotic relationship, or the religion of the Egyptians, which conceptualized the divine as manifestations of the beneficent and munificent forces of nature, or even the Hebrews, who emphasized the ethical and universal nature of their

6. Tandy (1997); Larsen: "The grand Assyrian vacuum-cleaner was assisted in its task of ruling the world by the gnomes of Byblos." Quoted in Purcell (1991), 38.

God and His role as the architect of human history, Greek religion included none of these traits but was actually characterized as a relationship in which gods and men ultimately owed each other very little.

Homer portrayed the Olympians as essentially powerful humans who could not die, and who seemed to possess more than a negligible capacity for anger, spite, jealousy, envy, irresponsibility, and vengefulness. Mutual affection between gods and men was totally absent.⁷ In fact, rather than being caring and nurturing, the gods were often indifferent to needless human suffering, even in those cases where the gods had an intimate connection with individual humans due either to parentage or exceptional piety. The most famous examples of these cases from Homer are the refusal of Zeus to save either his son Sarpedon or Hector, who honored the gods more than any other, from death at the hands of Patroclus and Achilles respectively (*Iliad* 16.426-461; 22.162-213). So strong was the Olympian association with malicious personality traits that Xenophanes was moved to note that: “Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and reproach among men, stealing and committing adultery and deceiving each other.”⁸ Consequently Greek religion evolved as a traditional set of ritual practices and cults that allowed humankind to maintain the goodwill of the gods by acknowledging their presence and rendering them their just due, but most of all, to avoid punishment emanating from celestial pique at being ignored.

Thus, a basic cynical and wary attitude towards the divine was established at the very beginning of the Greeks’ literary tradition, which tended to instill in them the conviction that the gods were not reliable allies in their day-to-day strivings. The corollary to this belief was also the notion that the gods were so indifferent towards mortals that they were not particularly interested in doing ill towards humankind either. Greek religion never developed the concept of the devil or of any powerful, malignant deity bent on destroying humanity. They did believe in *daimones*, lesser divinities who were sometimes blamed for malicious acts, but these were regarded more as nuisances than threats (Taylor 2012: 31). Ethics had little to do with success or failure in life and Olympian religion did not develop the ethical component that forms a major part of the Abrahamic tradition.⁹ Human beings were ultimately seen as responsible for their

7. Lloyd-Jones (1971), 3-4; Dodds (1951), 35, 54; Otto (1964), 231-60; Murray (1955), 65-7; Eliade (1978), 259-63; Raaflaub (2005), 255-6.

8. Citation in Kirk, et al. (1983), 168.

9. Taylor (2012) 35-7, 42-4, notes that a common feature of the Axial religions is that they embodied a universal ethical outlook that not only included the whole human community, but also called upon the divine as its guarantor. These faiths also encouraged people to engage with the world and make it better by combating evil.

own individual fates, with bad outcomes attributed to misfortune or personal character defects. Positive outcomes in everyday life were ultimately the result of individual or collective effort.

Later Greek discussions of the divine display a sense that celestial favor was no substitute for human effort as the Greeks did not regard the gods as the architects of their destiny. On the contrary, for the rest of their history, the Greeks always tended to emphasize the human element in any of their achievements with barely a passing nod in the direction of the gods. In many of the public religious dedications that survive from the Classical period, especially those commemorating military victory or athletic achievement, it is always the efforts of mortal men that are celebrated above all. The Greeks did not expect the gods to do things for them and consequently did not give credit solely to the gods for their accomplishments. Mikalson observed that Greek dedications to the gods for victory were more a recounting of the achievements of mortals which showed that the Greeks took considerable pride in their own contributions to their success. Sometimes the god's role is not even mentioned but the human actors are. In most cases the Greeks invoked the aid of the gods not for victory but for a 'fair fight' (Mikalson 2005: 170-1). As Aeschylus (*Persae*, 742) noted: "Whenever someone himself shows eagerness, the god also lends a hand."

The conviction that man is the master of his own destiny, and that humans are the primary actors in their own drama, was on display not only at the collective level but also in individual households. Another important text from the eighth century BCE is Hesiod's *Works and Days*, a didactic poem Hesiod addressed to his brother Perses which extols the virtues of hard work and the competitive nature of economic success. Daily toil is the portion allotted to mankind by the gods as "...the gods desire to keep the stuff of life hidden from us. If they did not, you could work for a day and earn a year's supplies... But Zeus concealed the secret, angry in his heart..."¹⁰ Despite providing a world that supplies everything humankind needs for prosperity, the gods, rather than being an aid to human well-being, are actually spiteful by requiring mortals to work hard to take advantage of it. Hesiod also discusses the two types of strife (*eris*) that characterize life in this world. First, there is the destructive kind that leads to war and violence. The second is beneficial for "...she urges even lazy men to work: A man grows eager, seeing another rich from plowing, planting, ordering his house; so neighbor vies with neighbor in the rush for wealth: this Strife is good for mortal men – potter hates potter, carpenters compete, beggar strives

10. *Works and Days*, 42-47 (Dorothea Wender, trans.). See West (1996) for background to this text.

with beggar, and bard with bard.”¹¹ Work is no disgrace – only idleness. Shame is attached to poverty, and pride with wealth. One should embrace work and seek only those fruits gained by hard labor, for this is what pleases the gods.¹² The bulk of the poem is devoted to practical advice for managing one’s assets. Significantly Hesiod advises his brother to avoid idling about the blacksmith shop with others gossiping, and to shun politics in preference for his own affairs.¹³

Hesiod’s text can be seen as a view from the ground of the remarkable transformation that was taking place in the eighth-century BCE Greek world. Economically, the Greek economy was shifting from pastoralism to sedentary cereal-based agriculture. Whether this was in response to, or a spur to, a dramatic rise in the population level, as much as 4 per cent per year, is a chicken-egg exercise (Snodgrass 1981: 20-4, 35-8). Whatever the impetus, the rise in population led to the reclamation of vacant land throughout Greece, and Hesiod himself was a part of this phenomenon as his family was laboring under harsh conditions to develop lands that had traditionally been unoccupied, which is probably why his text evokes the tone of the ‘rugged individualist’ often associated with the American pioneer. The movement to develop vacant land, coupled with the emigration of Greeks to newly founded colonies overseas, provided a new opportunity for lower-class freemen in Greece to achieve wealth by producing for the expanded Greek presence at home and abroad. This period also coincided with the growth in urbanism associated with the rise of the *polis*, resulting in a new population of town dwellers dependant on agricultural products brought in from the surrounding countryside. The classicist Victor Davis Hanson, himself a member of an agricultural family in California, found much in Hesiod that was familiar from his own personal experience. Farmers tend to be keenly competitive with one another, each one watching what the other one was up to, often innovating and developing their property just to keep up with the Joneses. Success or failure was usually attributed to the individual farmer’s willingness or ability to work (Hanson 1999: 90-106).

This is not the attitude of a peasant bound under some form of compulsory labor, for such workers had little incentive to labor harder for their landlords, who, at this time, were the aristocracy, the very class that dominated politics, the economy, warfare, in fact, every single aspect of public life in Greece (Gernet 1981: 279-288). Collectively, the aristocrats saw little purpose in further economic development, given their already predominant position, and tradition-

11. *Works and Days*, 20-26 (Dorothea Wender, trans.).

12. *Works and Days*, 311; 317-20.

13. *Works and Days*, 393-413; 493-503; Raaflaub (2005), 259.

ally held themselves aloof from the lower-class freemen (usually referred to as the *kakoi*), even holding manual labor in utter contempt. The ethos of Hesiod is the ethos of a rising landowning class, and the spur to prosper through hard, honest labor bears some striking resemblance to Weber's idea of worldly asceticism which he developed in his well-known essay on the Protestant Ethic (Weber 2002). Weber famously redefined asceticism as an attempt to master oneself in order to change the everyday world by bringing both under 'rational' control, which can also be described as the 'demanding school of inner-worldly (*innerweltliche*) asceticism.' Although Weber did not live to write an analysis of the religion of ancient Greece, he did complete a study of the ancient economy in which he noted the utility of commerce as the most efficacious way of getting rich quick (1976: 39, 51). One wonders what Weber would have made of Hesiod's text, especially with its spiritually mandated injunction to improve one's lot through efficient use of resources and productive labor. Such a religious outlook clearly led to the development of a Weberian worldly asceticism among individual Greeks which allowed for the economic rationalization that transformed Greece into a more competitive society in which social mobility was possible and poverty scorned.

The appearance of a new class of middling farmers (*mesoi*) came into being at the very time when the Greek world was reorganizing itself politically. A revolution seemed to be taking place throughout Greece which can be traced archaeologically.¹⁴ The sudden appearance of a new, expanded landowning class disrupted the traditional ordering of Greek society that had been in place for most of the Dark Age period. Weber (1976: 148, 185) noted that differences in family structure, inheritance practices, and even lifestyle gave this class a distinct character that further distinguished it from the elites. Such a new, significant locus of economic power could not be marginalized politically, and consequently the aristocracy could no longer justify their monopolization of the public sphere. Greek communal life was now reorganized within the new form of political community known as the *polis*. *Poleis* varied with regard to population, territorial expanse, and even level of urbanization, but a fairly typical *polis* was usually a federation of villages that sometimes included an older, Mycenaean citadel within its territory. The citadel took on a new life as the acropolis of the town, which not only served as a fortress of last resort in time of war or civil disturbance, but was also the location of the sanctuaries

14. Snodgrass (1992); (1981), 20-47, 154-159; Murray (1993), 57-68; Osborne (1996), 70-88; Morris (1989), 23.

for those cults that formed the essential components of the religion of the *polis* (Snodgrass 1981: 29-35, 154-9).

In most cases, the formation of the *polis* was more a necessity and less an act of equanimity on the part of the traditional elite. The expansion of the Greek population, bringing with it a significant up tick in economic activity, made the competition for scarce resources between neighboring polities even more intense. Warfare now became more endemic in the Greek world and the consequences of military failure went beyond the mere loss of prestige and honor for aristocratic war bands. Success or failure in war meant gain or loss of fertile land, access to lucrative trade routes, or, even worse, the destruction of the community and enslavement of the defeated population. Military necessity also brought with it new methods of waging war and so, throughout the Hellenic world, the hoplite phalanx became the typical fighting formation. Warfare now required each *polis* to field the largest army it could, and since the state could not provide the necessary equipment for the individual warrior, service in the phalanx was restricted to, and required of, those members of the community who had the means to outfit themselves with hoplite armor. In fact, Weber (1976: 151) argued that the need to be ready for war at any time was the chief incentive for a people to organize themselves as a *polis*. In addition, the military burdens imposed upon the free populations of farmers or small-owners accelerated the use of slave labor in the Greek economy (Weber 1976: 60). The new basis for political rights in the *polis* would be wealth, usually in the form of land ownership, and it would be the emerging class of free-holding, yeoman farmers, in combination with the old aristocracy, who would form the backbone of the phalanx (Weber 1976: 74). The same classes would also monopolize the voting franchise and tenure of public offices, which included elective priesthoods for the public cults of the state. Autarky, not birth, was the main principle determining who was granted full participation in the political life of the *polis* for it was believed that only those individuals who were economically self-sufficient could truly act as selfless, free agents for the common good in civic affairs.

Morris has traced this development archaeologically and has also shown that this change coincided with a transformation in the form of compulsory labor used in the Greek world. In the past, the aristocracy enforced a system of tenancy under which peasants were required to pay rents to absentee landlords. With the coming of the *polis*, we see the transition to a greater use of chattel slavery, an arrangement that both wealthy and middling landowners could participate in. The interdependence of these two phenomena (*polis* formation with increased chattel slavery) seems to be confirmed by the fact that in those areas of Greece

(Thessaly) where *poleis* did not predominate, bound peasantry remained the norm for agricultural labor, and traditional aristocracy, in some cases even kings, still controlled the political system. In the case of the *polis*, if the peasants are citizens, the aristocracy is limited in their ability to exploit them.¹⁵

The price for a greater level of political participation for one segment of the Greek populace was a heavier reliance on the enslavement of other Greeks and outsiders. Weber noted that the expanded use of slaves in agriculture and manufacturing resulted in limited economic opportunity for landless freemen and depressed consumer demand which prevented any expansion of the market for mass-consumed manufactures. In addition, slavery restricted the rationalization of production as there was little incentive for technological change or improvements in the organization of work. High maintenance costs and variable market conditions forced the slave owner to seek rents from his assets and not profits from his business, thus making him a rentier, not an entrepreneur (Weber 1976: 207-8; Finley 1977: 319).

The growth in the size of the rural middle class made the political life of the *polis* more participatory, thus laying the basis for the competitive political and intellectual climate of Axial Age Greece. In most cases, political rights never extended beyond the landowning classes, making oligarchy the norm for most *poleis*. However, since political authority was still diffused collectively, even in oligarchic states, more people were brought into the conversation. It is for these reasons that the Greeks may be said to have invented politics for it was the network of political relationships and interactions that the citizens established among themselves that formed the essence of the state. The *polis* was a radically new conception of the state and uniquely Greek. The basic organizing principle was the body of citizens in which there was no higher authority, or individual rights, or even class interests in the face of the needs of the whole. In return the state was expected to act in the interests of its citizens, and many of the policies pursued by the *poleis* had as their fundamental intention the economic improvement of the lives of its members. The *polis* was a community with a common aim (*koinonia*) in which the citizens *were* the state (Morris 1989: 2-3; Eisenstadt 1986: 32).

But those who lacked political rights were not excluded from public life for all citizens of the *polis* were bound together as a hereditary and sacred community, and it is in the realm of the cults of the state that the *polis* manifested its basic

15. Morris (1989), 1, 7, 9, 175-7, 196, 216-7; Patterson (1991) 47-81; De Ste Croix (1981) 135; Finley (1980), 86-90.

sense of solidarity in which all members, regardless of status, had a part.¹⁶ In fact, membership in any community in antiquity was usually defined in religious terms, and engagement at both the household and community level was based on one's acceptance into the rites associated with the individual family and *polis*. In the case of Athens, state cults mirrored domestic cults and also embraced the rural cults of Attica, a principle that reinforced the idea that all members of the *polis*, wherever they resided, were connected to one another. The cults of the *polis* were purely political and were intended for citizens only and so had no pretensions to universality. In addition, citizens of one *polis* had no interest in the cults of another.

The purpose of civic religion was to define and celebrate the people's collective bond as citizens of the *polis*, further reinforced by claiming common descent from a celebrated ancestor. All *poleis* maintained hero cults, and the appearance of these rites can be traced archaeologically to the formation of the *polis*. At the individual level, all citizens were expected to observe their ancestral rites, and impiety was considered treason. As Sourvinou-Inwood noted: "Religion was the *polis*' central ideology both articulating it and being articulated by it."¹⁷ The religious establishment that maintained the state cults was also reflective of the participatory nature of the *polis*. In most cases there were no hereditary priesthoods and most officiants were elected for only a limited term from the citizen body (Burkert 1985: 95; Zaidman and Pantel 1997: 49). In no case was there a unified priestly establishment that controlled significant enough resources to allow priests to impose a religious ideology that would stifle freedom of thought. Priesthoods, in effect, were subordinate to the *polis* (Weber 1976: 187-8). Outside of the requirement to respect the gods of the state, individual Greeks were free to express opinions, speculate, and even criticize the gods. The *polis* created a culture throughout Greece where there was freedom from religion, a crucial component for the Axial transformation. As Raaflaub noted, the highly developed political culture of Greece is why "... the divine realm remained relatively weak and undeveloped, and why 'transcendental visions' ...

16. Parker (1997), 80, contends Greek women had 'cultic citizenship.'

17. Fustel De Coulanges (1980); Mikalson (2005), 161-2, 172-9, 182-3; Mikalson (1983), 18-38; Snodgrass (1981), 38-9; Sourvinou-Inwood (1991), 303-5. See Plutarch, *Pericles*, 32.2, which reports an Athenian law (433 BCE) mandating prosecution for impiety, and Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, 2.267, which describes another law prohibiting the importation of a 'foreign god' without the approval of the *ekklesia*.

focused on human society and politics, or on nature, and always had a strong rational and pragmatic orientation.”¹⁸

The *polis*, although it provided the setting for the Axial Age, also made for its eventual demise. Part of the consequence of having a decentralized, competitive political environment, such as Greece was during the fifth century BCE, was an increase in interstate conflict. The consistent escalation in the scale of these conflicts was originally set in motion by the Persian invasions of the early fifth century BCE, which provided both the rationale and impetus for the creation and growth of imperial Athens, itself justifying its need for expansion as a necessary act of survival for all the Greek world in the face of the ever present Persian threat.¹⁹ The Athenian empire also had a specific class basis for its support throughout the broader Greek world as it preferred its subject states to be democracies on the Athenian model. The privileged, propertied classes throughout Greece felt threatened by the grasping nature of the Athenian empire, leading to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian Wars as a crusade to stop Athenian expansion in its tracks.²⁰ The eventual defeat of the Athenians in this conflict is largely attributed to the ill-conceived policies of the demagogues, a species of popularly elected leaders whom Weber counted among his examples of the ‘charismatic domination’ type of political leadership.²¹ The subsequent downfall of the Athenian empire also brought with it the downfall of the age of the *polis*. Sparta attempted to replace Athens as the hegemonic power in Greece only, in turn, to be brought down by the challenge of Thebes. Thebes was later humbled by a coalition of her former allies and enemies. The cycle of interstate warfare remained continuous and persistent throughout the fourth-century BCE Hellenic world, resulting in all Greece gradually becoming so weakened and impoverished that it was finally made ripe for conquest by the rising power of the Macedonian monarchy of Philip II. Greece’s ultimate political fate was to become a province in an international empire, like the older states of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Over time, all Greeks would come under the rule of one of the Macedonian successor states. Politics became largely irrelevant as all significant

18. Raaflaub (2005), 273-5; Vernant (1982), 49, claimed that the advent of the *polis* was a decisive event in the history of Greek thought.

19. Meiggs (1984) is the standard survey. For a more positive assessment of the Athenian state, see McGregor (1987), 166-177.

20. Finley (1985), 49-50 believed the empire was a necessary component for the Athenian type of democracy; Ober (1989), 24 argued that radical democracy may not have been possible without the empire to buffer the financial strains of the state. See Hanson (2005) for a recent treatment of the conflict.

21. For a critique of Weber’s views, see Finley (1986: 93-9).

decisions would be made by a far-away Hellenistic monarch, to be later replaced by a Roman emperor.

The immediate aftermath of the Peloponnesian War also brought to an end the open intellectual climate of philosophical inquiry and religious innovation in Athens. I.F. Stone gave a stunning appraisal of the political context of the trial and death of Socrates, seeing it as a collateral event to the internal political conflicts that occurred in the aftermath of the defeat of Athens by Sparta. Athenians were no longer in the mood for challenges to the prevailing social and political order and, consequently, intellectuals were no longer safe and, once again, had to go into exile, only to find safe harbor in the court of a monarch, not a competitive political state.²² There was always a certain degree of pessimism in the Greek mind, especially evident in the later decades of the fifth century BCE when it was clear things were in decline. Perhaps knowledge of the collapse of the Mycenaean world instilled this concept at an early point in the Greeks' history. Ultimately, the competitive world of the *polis* also contained the seeds of its demise.²³

The shift to a different kind of state in the Greek world during the Hellenistic period also led to a shift in philosophical and religious outlook, which became deeply personal and unconcerned with any kind of political or social activism. Even political theory remained conservative with Aristotle's *Politics*, looking backward, constituting a political treatise for the *polis* at the very time when it became irrelevant (Eisenstadt 1986: 36). Plato abandoned all notions of equal political rights for all members of the community and advocated a more totalitarian form of government (Popper 1971). It is interesting that Sparta came to be looked upon more favorably in Roman imperial times, and a significant body of literature extolling the virtues of the Spartan system was produced which, in turn, would heavily influence the foundational texts of the European Enlightenment. Plato himself seems to be anticipating the Christian Roman empire with the program he advocates in *The Laws*, which calls for a state ideologically united around a single religious creed. Apparently the direct experience of democracy that Plato experienced, with all its messiness stemming from contrary, contending views, led to unfortunate outcomes for the state as a whole.

22. Stone (1988); For a discussion of the issues related to Socrates' trial and death, see Parker (1997), 199-207.

23. Lintott (1987), 252-63; Eisenstadt (1986), 36-7; Note Runciman (1991), 364, on the failure of Greeks to achieve a larger, peaceable union: "... the *poleis* were all, without exception, far too democratic."

A new state founded upon a new religious ideology was seen as preferable to the competitive political environment of the *polis*.

Although the *polis* proved to be an evolutionary dead end as a viable political community, it played a significant role in the history of Western thought by providing the setting that allowed for the axial transition in Greece. While scholars continue to debate the utility of the Axial Age concept as a tool for analyzing religious change across synchronous world cultures, it is clear that societies possessing the necessary social, economic, literary, and spiritual preconditions, such as Archaic Greece, experience the transcendental transformation in religious thought. In fact, in comparison to the Axial Age cultures of China, India and Israel, it may be said that Greece was the quintessential Axial Age society. Earlier I noted (n.1) that although Karl Jaspers originally formulated the idea of an Axial Age, his analysis was largely influenced by the work of Max Weber. In fact, both Bellah (2011: 271) and Torpey (this volume) have noted that Weber (1978: 441-2, 447) seemed to anticipate the Axial Age in his comparative treatment of world religions by noting the occurrence of a 'Prophetic Age' during the eighth and seventh centuries that extended through the sixth and fifth centuries in Persia, India, and Israel with some analogues in China. In addition, Weber did a detailed analysis of ancient society (1976) which is stunning in its display of encyclopedic knowledge of antiquity. Although Weber has been criticized for getting some aspects of the ancient world 'wrong' (see criticisms in Finley 1977 and 1986), being largely hampered by the state of historical knowledge at the time he was living, his work was prescient in its recognition of the importance of the economy in social and political organization. Had he lived longer and continued his analysis of world religions, it is likely he would have returned to Ancient Greece and noted the particular conditions of Archaic Greece that, coupled with its secular theology and economic drive to rationalize the world, made possible the rise of the *polis*, the political setting for the axial breakthrough. What I am attempting to do here is anticipate Weber's hypothetical analysis by placing the economic, social and political conditions of Archaic Greece within the context of Greek religion.

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