
Chapter 10

Global Ages, Ecumenic Empires and Prophetic Religions

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Introduction: naming ‘modernity’

Since the moment sociology came into being, one of the favourite – and arguably most pointless – predilections of social theorists was to find a name that best captures the new, epochal reality. Is this new type of society ‘modern’ or ‘industrial’? Should it be called as ‘capitalism,’ or rather as ‘modern capitalism’? Or are we living inside a new period within modernity, a ‘late’ or ‘post’-modern age; which then, with an ‘inventive’ use of the suffix ‘post,’ can be also characterised as ‘post’-industrial, ‘post’-materialistic, ‘post’-Fordist, and so on?

At least some of the reasons for the attractiveness of such verbal games are quite evident. It is part of an infatuation with concepts and a mistaken identification of language with the act of naming; a development that more or less destroyed medieval philosophy and that again gained ascendancy with German idealism, especially with neo-Kantianism. It is a part and parcel of ideological thinking, another main characteristic of modern thought, a way to describe ‘us’ (part of the theoretical or political sect) from ‘them,’ who use a different, ideologically/politically ‘incorrect’ terminology. It is part of the hubristic identity of our age, the belief of us ‘moderns’ that we are living in a not just different but new and better age, in opposition to all those other cultures and civilisations who were all ‘traditional’ (Latour 1991). Finally, it is part of a theoretical hubris, the smug satisfaction of the thinker who fancies to come up with a new and better definition of the age that so far everybody attempted in vain; or, even more, to identify the signs of the times and recognise, as a herald, a brand new epoch.

The new label ‘globalisation,’ which pushed literally out the term ‘post-modern’ from the top of the hit-parade of such expressions, is mostly just another fancy of the intellectual fashion. The general quality of the literature hailing the new intellectual idol is certainly not above the level of the discussion of post-modernism. There is some sense, however, in which this new expression, maybe against itself, carries new potentials. First of all, the term is effectively value free – even though such a claim may seem paradoxical, even untenable, given the current, highly politicised debate on globalisation and the activity of various type of ‘anti-global’ movements. But the term ‘global’ is purely formal term describing

extension and not development, not even in the sense of growth. Second, and most importantly, it does not define the epoch in terms of an absolute novelty, and in this way it allows to bring out parallels between this age of 'globalisation' and other historical periods that could be characterised with similar kind of increasing interconnectedness. Most importantly, from this perspective it becomes possible to revisit the problem of the links between the 'ancients' and the 'moderns;' especially the striking parallels between the world-conquering empires of long bygone times and our own age.

Taken seriously, this perspective leads to a fundamental reversal of perspective on the thought of the last two centuries; probably even going back to the times of the Renaissance and the Reformation. The dividing lines between the main modern theories and ideologies become small, each of them losing much of its inflated importance and studied seriousness. The first thinker who reached the height of such a perspective was Nietzsche, in his diagnosis of modern nihilism and the idea of the 'eternal recurrence of the same,' even if – as it often happens – his truly pioneering ideas were muddled together with gross errors and huge exaggerations. The central analytical tool which Karl Jaspers developed, in the footsteps of Nietzsche and especially Max Weber, was the by now well-known thesis about 'axis time' or 'axial age.'

Revisiting the 'Axial Age' thesis

There are two aspects of the axial age thesis that I'd like to revisit here: the question of whether it is possible to give some kind of explanation for the startling coincidences; and whether this period of 6-5th century BC was indeed the turning point of history. The standard answer, I believe, is no to the first question and yes to the second. I suggest that the two questions closely belong together, can be thus answered at the same time, but in a manner that is opposed to the classical account.

The sudden outburst of spiritual movements in various parts of the globe can be explained through the concept of liminality, as applied to the outbreak of a global empire building process that took increasingly shape from the 8th century BC onwards. It started with the neo-Assyrian empire, spreading first towards the West (Lydian and Phrygian empires), then towards the East (Median and Persian empires). The aim of these empires was – arguably – completely new: to conquer the entire planet. The results were also unprecedented, in terms of the size of the armies suddenly mobilised, the wealth amassed (one only has to think about still widely used expressions as the 'Midas touch' or 'rich as Croesus'), and the bloodshed and mass suffering created. The first empire to gain an – almost – global status was the Persian, after its victory over Croesus in 546 BC and the conquest of Asia Minor, the victory over Babylonia in 538 BC, and finally the conquest of Egypt in 525 BC.

The connection between the axial age and empire building was already noted by Jaspers and emphasised by Voegelin, who proposed to replace the concept 'axial age' with that of 'ecumenic age.' Through the concept of liminality, however, it is possible to give both a precise conceptual definition and a respective timing of these periods. According to this theoretical framework, the 'axial age' is a typical liminal phenomenon, emerging at the temporal and spatial limit, or 'limes,' of the emerging global empire.

Concerning space, the key developments of the axial age took place in Palestine, a coastline on the margins of Assyria, and Ionia (the birth-place of all major early Pre-Socratics), another coastline on the margins of the Lydian and Phrygian empires; while Northern India, where Jainism and Buddhism arose, was also at the limits of Persian expansion. China was not directly touched by imperial conquest; however, it had contacts with both Persia and India, and it would be difficult to argue that it was completely unaware and sheltered from the impact of such developments.

Moving to temporal liminality, I will only call attention to a singular point. It has been pointed out by Jaspers, and emphasised ever since, that the most striking coincidence in the axial age was the almost identical life span of three among its most important and characteristic figures: Heraclitus, Confucius and the Buddha, each being born around 550-540 BC and dying around 480 BC. This coincidence, and thus the height of the axial age, can possibly be explained by the fact that the crucial period in the rise of the Persian Empire, the decades lasting from 546 to 525 BC was at the same time the formative period in the life of each of these epochal figures.

I would like to stress that the explanation offered here is of a very specific, formal kind, with strict limits. Liminality refers to a certain type of situation, and certainly cannot explain in any way the content of the ideas, religious, spiritual or philosophical, that emerge in a liminal time or place. Even further, as Victor Turner emphasised it, the aim of rituals that staged liminality was by no means to stimulate creativity or innovation (though this also can happen in liminal moments), rather to evoke and render manifest the 'sacred' that was at the heart of the value system of the community. It is, however, exactly such intensive evocation of the most important values and traditions of the community that can be noticed among the most important figures of the axial age, especially in its early period. The great prophets of the 8th and 7th centuries BC did not create a new religion, rather re-stated, in the context of threats of Assyrian and then Babylonian conquests, and in a particularly concise and effective way, the central tenets of the religion of the fathers, including a call for a return to the traditional ways. The same traditionalist perspective animated the ideas of Lao-Tzu, the great figure of Taoism, or Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. Thus, first of all, and especially in its early period, the 'axial age' was not an unprecedented and simultane-

ous eruption of the transcendent into the world, rather an intensification of the various classical traditions as a response to the rising global empire.¹

It is true that with the three great figures mentioned above, and their various contemporaries, a new tone is being introduced into the picture. Buddha is different from Mahavira, and also more 'modern,' moving further away from the classical ways, and the same contrast can be established between Confucius and Lao-Tzu, or Deutero Isaiah and Jeremiah. This new note, however, is not simply a novel transcendence, and not even an effective, resounding response to the troubles of the age, rather a novelty that can be best characterised as an increasing *resignation* to the inevitable, a tone of hopelessness only coloured by excessive and unrealistic expectations. It is this resignation which can be identified as the common mentality behind the Nirvana of Buddha, the propagation of the ritualised learning of the Confucian courtly gentleman, or the pre-Socratic sage epitomised by Heraclitus, while the ecstatic but unrealistic hope can be captured in the vision of the new Messiah, whose first great prophet was Deutero Isaiah.

If the axial age, especially in its early moments, was the expression of trauma (Alexander 2003; Giesen 2004), the threat produced by the liminal moment of the rising empires, then the classical thinkers of the axial age rather reflected the reality of the emerging age of empires. This would suggest a quite gloomy outlook: the solution to the 'time of troubles' was not provided by the great thinkers of spiritual reformers, rather by the grim reality of empire-building.

There was only one exception to the rule; a temporary exception, it is true, but extremely significant, and this was Athens. As it is well-known from history, in the Persian Wars the Greek city-states under the leadership of Athens managed to defeat the Persians, against all the odds, and thus not only delayed the emergence of the first 'truly global' empire by a century and half, but also produced an astonishing flourishing of culture, having at its centre the city where both democracy and philosophy were born. Three aspects of this development will be singled out for attention here. First, this period of Athens has been repeatedly characterised by the expression 'grace.'² Second, after only a few decades, Athens itself succumbed to the pursuit of an imperial politics. Third, there is the question of the paradoxical role played by the sophists in Athenian history, especially the contrast between the sophists and Socrates; a contrast that seems to have been fundamental for Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and thus to classical philosophy; but also a difference that time and again seems to have been lost – not the least, in our own age, which tends to treat Socrates as just another sophist.

1 This was argued by Béla Hamvas (cf. Szakolczai 2005).

2 See Meier (1987) and MacLachlan (1993). Foucault's concern with parrhesia, which could be defined as charismatic or graceful speech, also belongs here (see Foucault 1996; and Szakolczai 1998, 2003).

After this Athenian ‘interlude,’ however, with the rise of the Macedonian Empire and the conquests of Alexander the Great, it was a clear victory for the age of global empires. It was this recognition that made Eric Voegelin to suggest the idea that instead of an ‘axial age,’ one should rather talk about the ‘ecumenic age.’ The ecumenic age, however, if we take it to include the Persian, Macedonia and Roman Empires, is an extremely huge time period, covering about a thousand years, and the original idea of Jaspers about an ‘axis time’ in history becomes lost. It seems to me much more rewarding to return first to the original definition of the axial age by Jaspers as the period between 800-200 BC, but revisiting its various sub-periods instead of considering it as a whole. There, after the interlude of Athens, the axial age according to Jaspers ends with the various Hellenistic religious and philosophical movements. These movements, however, are indeed developing under the shadow of the age of empires, magnifying and exaggerating exactly those elements of resignation and hopelessness on one hand, and of exaggerated, unrealistic hopes on the other, that we have already seen with the great figures of the late 6th and early 5th centuries BC. Thus, in the field of religion, the Hellenistic age is increasingly characterised by the various apocalyptic, dualistic, Gnostic and Messianistic sects, or the ‘religious rejections of the world’ (Weber); while at the philosophical level by the proliferation of the various sophist, cynic, stoic, epicurean and sceptic schools; and even the utopianism characteristic of Plato and Platonism can be situated here. Of particular importance is the rise of Cynicism, that can be traced directly to the disciples of Socrates, and was identified by Foucault as lying both at the limit and heart of Ancient philosophy for about 8th centuries,³ and whose central characteristic was to turn, in a true trickster fashion, the ‘natural’ functions of human beings (like eating, defecating and copulating) into the essence of mankind that must be constantly revealed and performed in public, thus allegedly demonstrating the ‘deeply secret’ truth that human beings are simply animals.

This argument will be concluded by two comments. First, even this short enumeration alludes to a series of striking parallels with modernity, or the ‘new’ or ‘second age’ of globalisation, and especially its current phase in which we are living. It would be an interesting and instructive game trying to identify our popular and influential philosophical, spiritual or ideological movements by the various sects and schools of the Hellenistic period. Second, in this way the thesis of Jaspers can clearly be refuted, at least in one important sense. Jaspers attempted to shift the centre of world history, in a polemic against Hegel, from the birth of Christ (allegedly of relevance only in one tradition) to a period in which fundamental spiritual and religion movements started all around the globe. However, as we have seen, the axial age did not produce *new solutions*; and the em-

3 In the as yet unpublished 1984 Collège de France lectures, available at the Foucault Archives; see Szakolczai (2003: 202-9) for details.

phasis is placed separately on both the words *new* and *solutions*. The ideas of the axial age were not that new; and in so far as they were genuinely new, they did not really produce solutions; at any rate, by the end of the period identified by Jaspers, they were overtaken by (or degenerated into) the various religious and philosophical rejections of the world.

The axial age did not produce solution. The genuine, lasting and effective solutions were produced by the great prophetic, monotheistic or salvation religions.

Revisiting the ‘prophetic religion’ thesis

Seemingly, this leads us back from the axial age thesis to the old thesis of Max Weber, and many others, concerning the unique significance of prophecy in world history, especially the prophecies that gave rise to the three great monotheistic religions. However, I would like to argue that the axial age discussion was by no means a mere digression, as this discussion can shed new light on the understanding of the specific characteristics of prophetic religions.

First of all, just to restate the obvious, the main prophetic world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, even Zoroastrianism, emerged outside the axial age, no matter how broadly we draw its boundaries. This fact led Eisenstadt to coin the concept ‘secondary breakthroughs,’ which is somewhat problematic, as – given their effective impact – it is difficult to consider Christianity and Islam as ‘secondary’ compared to the spiritual movements of the axial age.

Second, the axial age hypothesis was reinterpreted, following Voegelin’s ideas, in the context of the rising age of global empires. This also helps to shed a somewhat new light on the rise of the three great prophetic religions, as each of them emerged in the very specific context of major empires. Judaism emerged – and the crucial element here is the tradition, not the impossible question of whether Abraham or Moses were ‘historical’ figures of not – in between and in the context of the two great empires of the early times, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Christianity came into being together with the rise of the Roman Empire; and in this context it is of special symbolic value that Jesus was reputedly born exactly the moment in which, as a particularly striking act of hubris, the first self-acknowledged Roman emperor wanted to count the number of his subjects. Islam, finally, as it has been powerfully argued by Henri Pirenne, emerged out of the context of the collapse of the Roman Empire, indeed bringing the protracted last moments of this empire to an end.

The third point, however, seems the most important of the three, especially because of its deeply paradoxical character. It is simply taken for granted that the great monotheistic religions came up with a solution that was not only different from the logic of empires, but radically opposed to it as well. Yet, and most paradoxically, each of them developed, almost since the beginnings, a peculiar – one is tempted to say: almost ‘perverted’ – affinity with such imperial logic. For

the founders of ancient Judaism the great cities and empires embodied hell on Earth; and yet, the great promise of Yahweh to Abraham was a rule of his heirs over the world. For the early Christians the Roman Empire was the embodiment of the Antichrist; and yet, a few centuries later, it became first the official religion of the Empire, and then of the so-called 'Holy Roman Empire;' not to mention the various adventures of the papal state, a main model for the modern state. Finally, and probably in the least controversial manner, less than a century after its emergence Islam created an empire on its own.

The question is whether it is possible to explain, in a coherent framework, both the radical innovations and promises, and the problems, of the prophetic world religions in a single and coherent theoretical framework.

Elements of a theoretical framework

In a very sketchy and preliminary manner, three elements of such a theoretical framework will be presented in the following. The first is related to the distinction between good and bad in the form of the benevolent and the evil, central for the world religions; the second attempts to capture the dynamics of the change characteristic of the ecumenic age; while the third revisits a fundamental theme of social and political theory, the question of order.

The setting up of a new and definite measure for values, a distinction between good and bad, in the specific form of opposing good and evil was perhaps the single most important characteristic of prophetic and salvation religions. This was also the aspect singled out for target in Nietzsche's attack against the alleged 'revaluation of values' brought about by such prophetic religions. It seems thus an almost inevitable starting point for our analysis. However, instead of starting with a critique, this paper suggests an effort of contextualisation, relying on the combined tools of comparative anthropology and mythology, offering the contrast between charisma (or the charismatic hero) and the Trickster as the context in which the opposition between the divine and the diabolical can be situated.

The concept 'charisma' is well-known from the works of Max Weber, so only a few comments will be offered. First of all, Weber took the term from the Christian theology of *grace* – a term that will be revisited soon in greater detail. Second, in elaborating his term, especially in discussing the military hero or the charismatic magician, Weber made ample use of anthropology and mythology. Finally, partly preparing the later discussion of grace, I would like to emphasise that the theological concept of grace, just as the Weberian concept charisma, has a fundamental link to the idea of gift.

The term 'trickster' is much less known in sociology, though quite familiar in anthropology. It is one of the most archaic, and most ambivalent, figures in folktales and myths. Its classic exposition can be found in the works of Paul Radin (cf. also Baumann 1978), a main protagonists of the founding period of modern

anthropology. The Trickster is a prankster and joker, always ready for a laugh, and is thus often a very pleasant company, his cunning and funny stories much loved by children; but his tricks often involve deceptions, the laughs can easily turn sour, and the nice fellow can be suddenly transformed into merciless impostor, even a cruel murderer. The Trickster is always a thief, while a recurrent theme of the various trickster stories is his fascination with human bodily functions. It has an insatiable appetite, and the same applies to his sexual organs and activities, often being depicted with an enormous phallus. Finally, one of his preferred theme for jokes concerns defecating, an activity which he also loves to perform in public.

Let me call attention to a few aspects of the trickster that are specifically relevant for this paper. First, trickster figures often play a mediating role between humans and divinities; they are sometimes even explicitly defined as the messengers of gods. This is true particularly for the Greek Hermes, an archetypal trickster (Kerényi 1958, 1984), but it is just as significant that Satana, out of whose figure the devil emerged, already in Hellenistic Judaism, was also originally one of the angels, or messengers of Yahweh (Pagels 1995). Second, a key personality characteristic of the trickster is a basic human defect: a lack of ability to be grateful, especially to give or to return gifts. This feature is again brought out in several important works of art about the figure of the devil,⁴ but is analysed with particular clarity in an amazing work written in the early Renaissance, the *Momus* by Leon Battista Alberti.⁵ Momus was a marginal figure of Greek mythology, given some prominence by Lucian: another figure in between gods and men, mostly involved in the spinning of intrigues, trying to convince the gods to destroy humans, and trying to convince the humans that the gods don't exist.

Finally, a most perplexing feature of the trickster is his role as a second creator of the world; in particular, as a creator of culture. In fact, Radin sometimes speaks of the trickster as being not even separate from the culture hero. This is especially striking given the contrast between the Trickster and the charismatic hero. In spite of all the importance of the latter, its potential impact is limited to *restoring* order, while the deeply ambiguous and often repulsive Trickster is outright credited with the *foundation* of culture. This is certainly a puzzle that needs to be solved.

The second point is related to the problem of social change. My central point is that the most widely used theoretical models, like the idea of a gradual, natural, organic growth, or the dialectics of opposites and their struggle, are simply irrelevant for capturing the particular dynamics characteristic of the ecumenic age. The movement instead has the character of turbulence, avalanche, maelstrom, whirlwind, hurricane or tornado, starting from small, almost imperceptible movements, then gradually gaining momentum and developing into an irresistible

4 See for e.g. the classic epic poems by Milton, Goethe, or Madách.

5 I owe this point to Agnes Horváth.

ble storm. This type of movement is captured by chaos theory, but in the world of human beings the animating force of the movement is *imitation*. This indicates that the paradigm of the rationality of human beings must be bracketed in favour of a study of the imitative nature of humans, an approach pioneered by Le Bon and Tarde, and which had an major impact on such classics as Durkheim, Pareto and Freud, while in contemporary social theory it was developed further by Norbert Elias or René Girard. The spiralling movement of imitative behaviour can take off with especial force under volatile, malleable 'liminal' conditions.⁶

One of the fundamental implications of such a model concerns the much-debated question of resistance. The term has become the key word for any approach that does not accept and take for granted the contemporary world of modernity, modern capitalism or globalisation. However, it is clear that a hectic, frenetic movement spinning out of control cannot be resisted. One can only wait and hope for the storm to pass; anybody trying to resist it will be either simply carried away like a leaf or, even worse, contribute to animate the same spiralling movement. This is best visible in the fact that all those political and social movements who put resistance into the banner simply became just another players in the same game, often changing sides, individually or collectively in the process. Opposites within a spiral have no stable, distinct substance, as it is really of not much interest who and from where is spinning further the turbulence.

Apart from remaining stable, in a Stoic manner, there is only one option: this is conversion,⁷ or the radical transformation of the movement into a completely opposite type of dynamics. The completion of such a reversal involves the question of grace; and this opposite type of spiral is illustrated in an at once simple and striking manner by the figure of the Three Graces.

The third point concerns another of the central issues of social and political theory, the question of social order. My observations will take off from Alessandro Pizzorno's seminal article (Pizzorno 1991), which revisited the Hobbesian problem and questioned the very foundations of an individualistic approach to the problem of social order.

One of the central issues concerning social order is inequality. It seems to me that practically all the different contemporary approaches share the premise that full equality is a desirable model for the relationships between human beings; and that the problem is how to reconcile this unquestionable ideal with the realities of existing inequalities. This idea, however, is based on certain assumptions which are not only mistaken and untenable, but positively harmful and dangerous.

6 Two representative poets of the twentieth century use a stunningly similar spiralling metaphor in two key poems; see 'The Second Coming' (1919) by William Butler Yeats, and 'I Live in Expanding Rings' (1905) by Rainer Maria Rilke.

7 This has been discussed in contemporary thought by Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, Franz Borkenau or Károly Kerényi, much influenced by another famous line of Rilke, the call for 'change your life.'

First of all, I suggest to situate the discussion of equality or inequality on the broader plain of the question of the symmetry or asymmetry of relationships. The usefulness of this distinction becomes visible in the second step, concerning the possible modalities of establishing a new relationship between human beings. The central point here is that such an introduction, initiation or initiative must of necessity be asymmetrical. Somebody must *start* to act and speak; and if by accident both sides start doing something at the same time, the result will be unintelligible or threatening – which more or less amounts to the same thing, as lack of intelligibility is always threatening.

There seems to be two, and in this case *only* two, possibilities for the establishment of a link between two persons. One is the application of force, constraint or violence – to impose one's own will or desire, or simply one's self, on the other. The other is the exact opposite: to withdraw or subordinate one's self, and instead of asking or forcing something; to present a gift, or to give a present.

Within the limits of this paper only a few preliminary comments will be offered. First of all, it seems quite peculiar that while the problem of force and violence took up a major place in classical political thought, the question of gifts and gift-giving was hardly discussed, its importance being only pointed out in modern anthropology by Malinowski or Polányi, but especially by Marcel Mauss (1990). In political thought, the classical presentation of the first point was given in Plato's *Gorgias*. As the argument is well-known, I only single out one point: that in this highly programmatic piece of Plato the argument that unavoidable violence is the foundation of social order is presented by the Sophists; indeed, this is one of the main point identifying the sophist position. Second, the problem of the necessary asymmetry of an initiating contact between two human beings can be solved by the introduction of a third person, who indeed 'introduces' the side. This resembles to the logic of the legal system – but is not a solution of the problem at all, and for at least two different reasons: either because this third person knows both, thus it is not really the establishment of a brand new link; or because this third person possesses power or authority, thus the asymmetry is solved only through another asymmetry.⁸

Third, it should be pointed out that such introductions are accompanied by words and expressions like 'thanking,' 'greeting,' 'gratitude,' or the like; and that each such expression in most languages is etymologically linked to words depicting the giving or receiving of gifts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, behind these two possibilities, force or gift-giving, there is a definite state of mind that can be described as *benevolence* or *malevolence*. I want to emphasise that this refers to a character trait, not simply a matter of a single intention behind a single

8 The term 'asymmetry,' as used in this paper, stands in between the usual meanings of inequality and difference: it is less than the huge and abusive contrasts of wealth and power implied by the word 'inequality,' but more than mere 'difference.'

act; thus, to an entire mode of being and not only a feature of a concrete and well-defined action.⁹

From here, one could move to the easy generalisation that there are therefore two types of durable social relationships: one based on force, violence, oppression, repression, exploitation and the like, and the other based on generosity, magnanimity and benevolence. This, however, would overlook the problem that one cannot start *ex nihilo*: there is always already a social relationship, or an entire social order; and the question is on what principles it is based. Bypassing, among other things, the mystery of the origin of language, I only refer to one concept, or rather one fundamental, original experience: the experience of home, or of being at home in the world, an experience that is the foundation for every single human life, from the earliest days of childhood, yet has been very little theorised in social thought.¹⁰

Again, only two short comments will be made. First, the basic mode of being associated with the experience of home, and of living in a family, can again be best characterised by the word benevolence. A home, and a family, only exists in so far as it is based on principles of gift-giving and magnanimity, and not mutuality of interests. Second, relationships at the level of the home or the family, are again profoundly asymmetrical, though this by no means can be reduced to force or even inequality. This is partly because asymmetries related to age are fleeting and reversible – the helpless baby (whose powers are in many respects extraordinary) becomes a child, then an adolescent, then perhaps a head of family, finally again helpless and powerless in old age; while the asymmetries related to gender – again except very specific times and places – are also labile and reversible; the thesis about the universal rule of patriarchy being just as untenable, even nonsensical, as the Marxist claim about the universality of class struggle – of which it was directly derived.

Asymmetrical relations are therefore pervasive in the life on any human community – and it is on this basis that we can understand the various manners in which *symmetrical* social relationships develop. The first point to notice is that all such relations are profoundly *artificial*; and even further, that they are originally looked upon by deep suspicion, even horror, that can be observed in the almost universal horror the birth of twins creates in simple human communities. Symmetry undermines the distinctions that are the basis of healthy, mutual, benevolent relations in a community; the possibility of a trust that is the basis of stable, durable relations: that a gift given will be eventually returned, and abun-

9 In line with the etymological meaning of ‘bene-’ or ‘male-’volence, it has to do with good or bad will. In this sense, it qualifies Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ in the sense of Weber’s charisma. What matters, *pace* Nietzsche, is not simply the quantity of will, but its quality or direction.

10 This line of argument is explicitly opposed to Heidegger, and represents a slight change of emphasis compared to the classical sociology of family.

dantly. It also helps to identify the fundamental principle underlining the drive for symmetry: a growing suspicion and mistrust, that such gifts will not be returned; that the fountain of benevolence feeding a community is being exhausted, and that therefore everybody should be concerned not about the magnanimous *giving* of gifts and favours to the others, but rather to assure the *reception* of a fair share of the pie.

Having defined these three modalities of social relationship: asymmetry based on force, asymmetry based on benevolence and assured by gift-giving, and symmetry animated by a growing suspicion ‘foul play,’ we can return to the analysis of the ecumenic age.

The dynamics of the ecumenic age

At the phenomenological level, the age of growing imperial conquests can be described – and has indeed been described by the very first historical and philosophical analysts – as a tempest, a whirlwind, an epidemic, a spiralling movement of violence that is increasingly spinning out of control. The origins of this movement are lost in the mythical past; though the scenes evoked by Herodotus, the series of rapes (of Europa, Io and Helen) do possess a crucial explanatory power, linking violence and sex, the two most powerful human emotions, and also the most imitative aspects of human behaviour, at the source of the frenetic movement.

Warfare and conquest on an unprecedented scale create similarly unprecedented sufferings, but also the accumulation of huge fortunes, thus the growth of inequalities, or of asymmetries of the abusive kind. But such ‘simple facts’ of political ‘realism’ are also accompanied by an intellectual, reflexive interpretation, a growing conviction that not only such developments are inexorable, but that *this* is really life; this is the rule of existence; and furthermore, that the only way to ‘resist’ such developments is to assert, as an ideal, a world of complete equality; or a world of fully symmetrical relations. I think it is here that we can trace the phenomenon that Nietzsche first identified as the great ‘revaluation of values,’ the source of nihilism, and which he mistakenly assigned to the Judeo-Christian morality. Nietzsche’s diagnosis was modified by two great thinkers of the past century: by Weber, who called it the ‘religious rejections of the world;’¹¹ and by Voegelin, who identified this, in various stages of his work, with inner-worldly eschatology, with Gnosticism, and with the Sophists.

It is at this point that I will return the third of the major theoretical tools introduced in the previous section, the conceptual pair ‘Grace vs. Trickster.’ The

11 It should be noted that for Weber Ancient Judaism, early Christianity and Islam emphatically were *not* world-rejecting religions.

first point is the draw close parallels between the Sophists and the Trickster, and also with some key features of modern, secular, Enlightenment humanism. The second is to indicate how the theology of grace, as central to each of the three main monotheistic religions, suggests a solution exactly to the problem of the ecumenic age as exposed above.

As it is well-known from the law of entropy, symmetry is the death of movement; it is the elimination of the tension that enables something to happen. The ideal of full symmetry, one could thus say, is deeply nihilistic; and it is by no means accidental that in folktales, in art, in architecture, or in the number of flowers one is supposed to give to the loved one, human beings were always keen to avoid even the appearance of symmetry.

However, the problem, and the danger of the Sophist Trickster, is even more complex. This is because human beings are not simply particles that attract or push back each other. They always have their internal moving forces. The consequence of symmetry is therefore not the absence of movement, rather the stimulation, excitement or incitement of an ever increasing, eventually frenetic, spiralling movement, because of the absence of limiting and regulating, 'educating' asymmetries. The best metaphor from the physical world is therefore not stasis, rather short-circuiting.

The nature of the activity of the Sophist Trickster can be captured through Girard's analysis of the scapegoating mechanism. The trickster is the human being with a singular psychiatric defect, close to the sense of Radin: he cannot give gifts, lacking any benevolence or magnanimity himself, thus lacking any trust or confidence in the others. He is the par excellence anti-social outcast and outsider; but who therefore, short of hating himself, must elevate rigid and rigorous, immediate and generalised symmetry and equality to the centre of social life; who, therefore, feels much at home in the special type of crisis situation when the internal order of a society breaks down in a mimetic crisis.

Let me single out here again the fundamental symmetry between the positions of the charismatic hero and the trickster. Both of them are figures of the out of ordinary, not at ease, or not in place, in normal, ordinary social life. Their time comes in crisis and emergency; but in a completely different way. A charismatic hero is called upon when the community is threatened from the outside. He manages to defeat the enemy, to unify the community, to generate consensus and support against the threats. A charismatic person, however, is helpless in a situation of an internal collapse of order, when the distinctions and dividing lines break down, the community is segmented into hostile and warring factions, and by necessity he would immediately be classified as being just a member of one of the factions. The problem of an internal collapse of order as a problem of symmetry, or equality – and this is when the time of the trickster comes, the homeless outcast who is at home exactly in a time of trouble where both the community at large and any potential charismatic heroes are at a loss.

The trickster is not afraid of symmetry and equality, as it is his ideal; the

situation in which his deep deficiencies are cancelled. Because he speculated so much about equality – had the time to speculate, being impotent and useless for the normal business of life, and thus escaping into a fantasy world, sulking on his resentment, as Nietzsche analysed it so well –, he understood its greatest secret: that the solution of the problem of equality lies through terror, through the sacrifice of an innocent victim on whom the violence and hatred spinning out of control can be focalised. In this way, through the founder murder, out of the outcast the Trickster becomes the culture-hero.

A detailed study of the history of political thought would be required to show how the logic of the Sophist Trickster became, from the late Renaissance and the Enlightenment, through the English and French Revolutions, and then especially the various left and right-wing revolutions of the 20th century, a basic principle of modern political life.

The solution to the problem of the spiralling logic of the ecumenic age, and its ideologisation by the Sophists Trickster and its fellow travellers, is a return to the logic of gift giving. This is what – among others, but with particular force – the three monotheistic religions attempted, in spite of all the other, by no means negligible, differences. In this section, I offer a very preliminary analysis of the related ideas.

In the Old Testament, grace is expressed through two different family of words. The first, belonging to the root ‘hnn,’ refer to a ‘gifted initiation of relationship’ (Campbell 1993: 259-61; Weiser 1998: 351-2). In this sense Yahweh is the one who gives, who distributes favours, being the source of hope, and the role of human beings is to imitate him and behave accordingly to their fellows. The second root is ‘hsd,’ which also means favour but in the sense of compassion or mercy, and shifts the focus on the side of the human recipients. The mercy of god reaches the needy, the poor, those who are desperately in need of saving acts; but also those who committed sins, who erred, and who therefore are in need of a saving grace, for a turning back of god’s favour towards them.

Grace is thus fundamental for the relationship established between the deity and human beings, between Yahweh and his people; and it is also a fundamental asymmetrical relationship. The deity initiates and gives, while humans – who desperately need this saving act – receive, or are given. However, since the very first moments of contact, a different type of link is also present, inscribed in the interaction between the deity and Abraham: a contract, covenant or alliance; a legal, thus strictly symmetrical relationship, where both sides make certain promises and are therefore bound to behave according to this pre-established and mutual agreement. There are two comments I want to make here concerning this quite perplexing insertion of symmetrical legal ties at the heart of a fundamentally asymmetrical relationship. First, it is exactly here that the problem identified above can be located: the ‘promised land’ offered to the ‘chosen people,’ and the ensuing repetition of the exact imperial ambitions against which the tradition of ancient Judaism emerged. Second, the legal perspective, and the related rationali-

sation of the world-view, occasionally resulted in quite striking formulations, like the following statement from Wajikra Rabba: “An agreement was stipulated between them [i.e. God and Israel] that [God] would not repudiate them and they would not repudiate him” (Weiser 1998: 352); a formulation which seems to replace a saving act of divine grace with a mutual clause of refraining from harmful acts, or a positive deed with a double negation.

Grace in the New Testament closely follows the Old Testament meaning (Campbell 1993: 259-61; Weiser 1998: 352-4). The two Greek words used, *charis* (Latin *gratia*, or grace), present especially in the Pauline corpus, and *eleos* (Latin *misericordia*, or mercy), closely correspond to the two basic Hebrew roots, denoting respectively the pure, undeserved divine gift on the one hand, and his compassion on the other. The fundamental difference lies in the way for Christians the grace of god has become incarnated in Christ, the very embodiment of divine love and a gift for mankind, who has thus become the mediator of human salvation.

This implied first of all not simply a ‘new covenant,’ but a paradoxical, radical reassertion of asymmetry in the links between God and Man. Grace is a free, gratuitous act of God, done without any act or even invocation of human beings, and therefore the divine-human relationship cannot be in any way ascribed in a legal terminology. This novel emphasis on inequality, on the other hand, is paradoxical, as it is a consequence of the human incarnation of God, in the figure of Christ. This paradox will occupy a fundamental place in theology, perhaps most importantly (and certainly most controversially) as related to the figure of the Mother of Jesus, Mary.

Given this fundamental asymmetry, in so far as human beings are concerned the emphasis shifts even more on the part of imitation. Grace is a gratuitous act of god, but human beings also have a task in preserving and remembering such acts of grace, developing them into an entire mode of life, a *habitus*. In the language of Aquinas, the freely given grace (*gratia gratis data*) must turn the recipient into a ‘graceful’ person, in the sense of a person filled with grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) (Lonergan 1970). The word *habitus* was used both by Weber and Elias, later becoming a central term in the sociology of Bourdieu, and not without a profound reason, as it implies a constant concern with the reflexive improvement of conduct, itself relying on the idea of the care of the self or the soul (Foucault 1984b; Patocka 2002; Szakolczai 1994), that lies at the heart of the European civilising process.

The acknowledgement of the radical asymmetry between the divine and human sides rendered any ‘contract’ or ‘covenant’ impossible. Yet, it was exactly at the heart of the Christian theology of grace, in the writings of Paul, that in the specification of the human response two closely related and highly problematic elements came to be introduced: the doctrine of justification and the emphasis on individual salvation. The first re-introduced a legal terminology, that will have specially fateful effects with the Reformation; while the second contributed to the

assimilation of Christianity with the 'salvation religions' and the 'religious rejections of the world,' shifting the emphasis from the re-instatement of the logic of gift-giving (or the 'Kingdom of God,' Mk 1: 15) into the heart of human relations to the escapist and egoistic implications of individual salvation.

Both in terms of form and substance, the concept of grace in Islam is just as closely tied to the Christian interpretation as the New Testament was to the Old Testament (Weiser 1998: 354-5). First of all, as a form of greeting the word '*Rahim*' (usually translated as 'merciful,' close to the meaning of the second Hebrew root for grace 'hsd') introduced all but one of the Suras of the Koran, just as it was used abundantly in the opening sentences of Paul's letters, and most importantly by Gabriel when meeting Mary in the scene of the Annunciation (Cook 1986: 307). '*Rahim*' is also the Arabic term for the womb, evoking the idea of a 'gratis' protection through the womb.¹² Together with the crucial importance played by the angel Gabriel in the revelations given to Mohammed, this establishes extremely close contact between the formal aspects of grace in Christianity and Islam.

Concerning the theological substance, even in Islam grace is an unmotivated act of god, conceding favours and pardons to its undeserving recipients. The divinity who acts in this way is characterised as the Indulgent, the Pitiful, the Benevolent, the Magnanimous and the Dispenser of love. The role of human beings is to recognise this grace and to be grateful for it, and then to imitate this mode of being in their own lives. Given their own nature, human beings cannot act rightly without this divine grace, which is their only hope in overcoming the difficulties of their lives.

The revelations of divine grace were granted to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. Mohammed, on his turn, became then the mediator of human beings for the restitution of their sins and the help for their salvation. This aspect of individual salvation, and the promise of Paradise, already problematic in Christianity, became particularly strongly accentuated in Islam, turning into the driving force of quick and spectacular military conquests.

In spite of significant differences, there is a definite and unique pattern shared by all three great world religions. According to this, grace is the eruption of the divine into the world, an unrequited, gratuitous gift of the deity who in this way reveals himself. It established, or reveals, a fundamentally asymmetric relationship between God and Man, with the initiative fully on the side of the divine. This gift does not have the character of an object, and cannot even be reduced to a specific, concrete favour granted to a concrete individual; it is rather the demonstration of a fundamental predisposition of benevolence, of loving care, and the consequent message of hope that human beings are not alone in the world.

Though the asymmetry is total, and the original grace granted can in no way

12 I would like to thank Armando Salvatore for his clarifying comments concerning this issue.

be merited by the person(s) touched by it, human beings also have their task, and this is to preserve the original gift, to imitate it not simply by giving or returning gifts, but to turn benevolence and charity into the guiding principle of their life conduct, to transform the sudden and surprising eruption of grace into a permanent and effective force. It is this transformation that the word conversion captures: in limit cases, the sudden and radical change of the entire personality touched by the divine. But there is something more in it, and it is exactly here that the fundamental connection with the line of argument presented in this paper lies. Beyond the change of individual life and salvation, and beyond even singular sects or entire religions, arguably the crucial message, shared *by* all three world religions and thus uniting them, is the promise, and the heroic attempt to restore, in a world threateningly and hopelessly dominated by abusive asymmetric relationships, graceful asymmetry in the heart of human relationships; the only type of social relationship that has the power to reverse the spiral of violence and desire fueling abusive asymmetry, and to remain untouched by the sirens luring the careless towards the legal-economic dream of symmetry and equality.

As a last note, let me point out that the monotheistic religions are not alone in posing grace into the heart of their world-view. The same has been attempted, with remarkable success, in the line of development that connect the ancient Minoan civilisation of Crete, through the Mycenaean world, to classical Greece, especially the 'miracle' of Athens (Hall 1998; Meier 1987, 1996).

One could object that Greek grace was a purely aesthetic concept, with no relationship to the divine grace of monotheists, the similarity being only superficial. This, however, is not true; and the profound connections go way beyond the use of the same word (*charis*) in both cases. The Greek concern with aesthetics, as Foucault argued recently, was inseparable from ethics; while the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka pointed out the close connections between Greek epistemology and aesthetics in the emphasis placed on the manifestation of truth (Patocka 2002). Even further, it was a principle central for Athenian democracy, animating the conduct of the democratic citizens, as Christian Meier argued it. It is also central for the conflict between Socrates/Plato and the Sophists.

But gracefulness, together with beauty, and beyond, was also central to Greek religion, going back to its roots in Crete. Let me mention only two examples. One is the tradition of seals and signet rings in Cretan art, one of the most graceful manifestation of Minoan culture, and the stunning scenes of epiphanies some of its best pieces evoke. The other is the figure of the Three Graces, central especially to Hellenistic art and religion, and resurrected with particular emphasis in some of the most important books and paintings of the Renaissance: a group that manifests, in its very composition, the spiral of giving, receiving and returning of gifts.¹³

13 Such considerations were by no means restricted to Western Christianity; see Evdokimov (1990).

Conclusion: Hope beyond modernity

Let me formulate my concluding remarks in a provocative way. The current intellectual mood is to assign the cause of troubles in the current world to the prejudices of the past, especially the survival of religion; while the hope, supposedly, lies in the enlightened attitudes of secularised intellectuals who overcame these errors and who can lead a rational discourse towards the establishment of a just an equal world. The historical overview presented in this paper, and the conceptual framework that has been worked out to understand its implications, however, comes to the exactly opposite conclusion. According to this, it is the Enlightenment model that is chimerical, a modern resurrection of ancient Trickster-Sophist-Cynic attitudes and worldviews; while the solution can only come through a concern with grace, shared by all the three great world religions, and also by classical Greek culture, acknowledging and accepting benevolent, loving asymmetry.

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