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ON THE QUESTION OF CONCEPTUALITY OF KARL JASPERS' AXIAL AGE IDEA

This article studies the problem of conceptual basics of Karl Jaspers' Axial age theory. It briefly describes argumentation of main opponents of the theory. The hypothesis is put forward claiming that unsolved problems (a kind of "blank pages") in Karl Jaspers' concept are paradoxically related to the necessity of distinction between two symbolic visual images attached to the *Axis* conceptual field.

At the same time, the author offers a solution to the problem, namely: it is shown that proving the validity of Karl Jaspers' undoubtedly productive theoretical idea (regarding the *Axial Age* as a historical phenomenon, which definition will provide comprehension of the world history meaning in general) is to be based on the comparative analysis of the concepts of two scholars – Mykola Chmykhov and Karl Jaspers and with implementation of simulation modeling.

It is concluded that the proposed path of study is the most effective and optimal, for it may become a solution to important scientific questions which have been raised but not solved within the Jaspers' concept.

Key words: "axial age", "axis", cosmic law, comparative analysis, modeling method, *East-West* bifurcation.

"Axial age", as it was interpreted by the German philosopher K. Jaspers, is a moment of spiritual breakthrough, the spiritual transformation of society marked by synchronicity (8-2 century BC, with "epicenter" in the 5th century BC.) and geographically fixed within five relatively independent (autonomous) regions of the world – Greece, Judea, Iran, India and China. According to K. Jaspers, "axial age" is not only one of the four selected by him important stages of the history and culture of mankind, to which he includes so-called "Promethean era" – primitive age, "era of the great cultures of antiquity" – glorious civilizations of the Bronze Age (culture of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, etc.), then actually "axial age" and "era of science and technology"¹; but "axial age" for him was a special milestone of historical development, which should be defined as a center, a kind of "starting point" of world history in general. Moreover, the main theoretical argument in K. Jaspers' concept of "axial age" is based on that premise, according to which the definition of the meaning of "axial" period opens up the possibility of adequate interpretation of the meaning of the whole of world history².

However, K. Jaspers' idea of "axial age" was ambiguously accepted by scientific community. It gave rise to a considerable number of its ardent supporters, but also those who tried (and sometimes – quite reasonably) to somehow "undermine" foundations of its conceptualization.

Among the latter is particularly distinguished German historian Jan Assmann, who believed that what K. Jaspers called spiritual "breakthrough" of "axial age" should be interpreted as merely just a statement of transition from the so-called "ritual coherence to the textual", which, owing to the spread of writing, took place in different regions during the first millennium BC and therefore can not be "inscribed" in chronological limits of "axial age" defined by K. Jaspers³. Finally, Jan Assmann, in fact, denied conceptuality of the theory of "axial age", and categorically stated: "...I have to admit that I can not bring

¹ Ясперс, К. (1991). *Смысл и назначение истории*. Москва: Политиздат, 53.

² Ясперс, К. (1991). *Смысл и назначение истории*. Москва: Политиздат, 32-39.

³ Ассман, Ян (2004). *Культурная память: Письмо, память о прошлом и политическая идентичность в высоких культурах древности*. Москва: Языки славянской культуры, 314.

myself to believing in “axial age” as a global turnaround in the universal history ... Excessive fascination with time and simultaneity is a birth defect of the “axial age” theory, which gives it rather mythical than theoretical nature”¹.

On the other hand, Russian scientist V.Yeremeiev stated that in Chinese tradition in the 12-11 century BC (the era of the Western Zhou) the king Wen Wang developed “axial”, by essence, doctrine of “Protoarithmosemiotics”, which has already contained the basic ideas regarding spiritual revolution of the “axial age” (namely: 1 – “new understanding of the purpose of a human” as an effective structure of cosmogenesis; 2 – “awareness of opportunity to influence own destiny through self-development”, which suggested ascension through psycho-cosmos to the highest – transcendent – origin); in this regard, chronological boundaries of the “axial age”, proposed by K. Jaspers, should be revised, and therefore taken as far back to the time of the founding of Western Zhou Dynasty, i.e. the 12-11 century BC².

However, Ukrainian historian and philosopher Y.Pavlenko, accepting K. Jaspers’ basic argumentation regarding “axial age”, at the same time draws attention to the fact that the German philosopher only managed to capture this phenomenon, but could not explain it, or at least link it “with other stage changes that occurred before and during marked centuries”³.

In our view, the abovementioned ambiguity of scientific views on understanding the essence of “axial age”, so as rejection of its chronological limits defined by K. Jaspers, directly and primarily linked to the fact of existing synonyms within the conceptual field of “axis” in German, where the general concept “axis” has two semantic nuances, two meanings assigned to various words: German word “Angel” fixes idea of “axis” as the center of something, while the word “Achse”, used by K. Jaspers, fixes the idea of “axis” as a vertical, which crosses a horizontal. Remarkable is the fact, that the idea of “axis”, regardless of the means of its verbal expression in any specific language, in the mind of any person, as a rule, are two visual images that are fully consistent with the outlined above synonymous couple in German: visual images of axis as a vertical in a horizontal plane (the image of their intersection) on the one hand, and the axis as the center of anything – on the other. If we apply these visual images to the semantics of “axial age”, we will receive distinction of two different semantic spaces:

- **the first visual image of axis** (the idea of axis as a vertical, which crosses a horizontal): in this case, “axial age”, “axial” cultures are perceived as a synchronic vertical line that crosses the diachronic axis of world history (horizontal);

- **the second visual image of axis** (the idea of axis as the center of anything): in this case, “axial age” is seen as central, climax moment of the history, which meaning definition allows understanding the essence of world history in general.

Choosing metaphorical image of axis to describe the phenomenon of “axial age” K. Jaspers indirectly quoted Hegel, who in his lectures on philosophy of history called the idea of the trinity of God defining – “... the axis around which world history rotates. History starts in *this point* and goes from here forward”⁴. “While these statements, – reasonably notes Hans Joas, – may sound like a source for Jaspers’ book title, the problem with the whole quote is that Hegel in German original did not use the word “axis”, he used “Angel” – a word which is usually translated as a “hinge on the door; essence of a conversation, issue; rotation around the core issues of thought” or “point of rotation, fulcrum; rod; the main point; center”. Could it be possible that Jaspers’ confusion between “Achse” and “Angel” is the origin of the term that we all use today?” “More interesting is that – Hans Joas adds reasonably – all these questions are philological, however intellectual origin of the idea itself is a problem”⁵.

The paradox of Jaspers’ choice between German words “Achse” and “Angel” is, in our opinion, in the following. K. Jaspers at the first few pages of his book highlights the main theoretical thesis about “axial age” as a historical phenomenon, defining the essence of which opens the way to comprehend the meaning of world history in general, that means he used the meaning of “axis” as the center of something “hinge on the door”, the point of rotation around the main issue. Based on this, Jaspers’ readers hope to find

¹ Assmann, J. (2012). Cultural Memory and Myth of the Axial Age. *The Axial Age and its Consequences*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 398.

² Еремеев, В.Е. (2005). *Символы и числа «Книги перемен»*. 2-е изд., испр. и доп. Москва: Ладомир, 492-494.

³ Павленко, Ю.В. (2000). *Історія світової цивілізації: Соціокультурний розвиток людства: навчальний посібник*. Вид. 2-ге, стереотип. Київ: Либідь, 211-212.

⁴ Гегель, Г.В.Ф. (2000). *Лекции по философии истории*. Санкт-Петербург: Наука, 339.

⁵ Hans, J. (2012). The Axial Age Debate as Religious Discourse. *The Axial Age and its Consequences*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 10.

confirmation of this important theoretical thesis. However, this does not happen: K. Jaspers left all those questions unresolved, turning them into “white spots”. In addition, attention is attracted by the indisputable fact that K. Jaspers, trying to explain the nature of spiritual conflict of “axial age”, only made uncertain statements about its characteristics (“horror of the world”, “own helplessness”, “precipice”, “radical questions”, “liberation and salvation”) or generalizing considerations such as: a person “has the impression that he/she lives at a late stage of development, moreover, in a period of a decline. People feel the proximity of the *catastrophe*, eager to help with understanding education, introduction of reforms”¹. Thus, the “white spots” in the book of K. Jaspers are basic, crucial, fundamental questions: if there is a spiritual “gap” – then how exactly it reveals itself; if in “axial” cultures there is the idea of “salvation” – then how it occurred; if there is the spiritual “catastrophe” – then what is its fundamentally important essence?

Finally, in this regard, we can put forward an assumption that this circumstance (extremely serious issues, put by K. Jaspers, with no direct answers to them) has provoked the situation in which the theory of “axial age” was not unequivocally accepted by the scientific community and gave a wide scope not only for its arbitrary interpretations, but also to its serious criticism – even to denial of its conceptualization, as we can see in Jan Assmann’s works.

So, K. Jaspers not accidentally allow philological confusion between “Achse” and “Angel”: without giving necessary arguments in support of his main theoretical thesis (“axial age” as the notional center of the world history); he tried to confirm the idea of “axis” in another sense – axis as a vertical, which crosses a horizontal, that is not actually “Angel”, but “Achse”. But such type of “argumentation”, which could be called just merely a list of characteristic traits of “axial age”, is, in our opinion, nothing like actually fixing the main features of this historical phenomenon, but not explaining its principally important essence in the broader context of pre-“axial”, “axial” and post-“axial” cultures.

Thus, according to K. Jaspers the following features should be recognized the characteristic traits of “axial age”:

- synchronicity (8-2 century BC);
- autonomy;
- spiritual (ideological) parallelism; parallelism (identity, similarity) of “spiritual processes” in terms of their content;
- the existence of so-called personalistic idea (as common ground for this kind of ideological parallelism), which comes down to persons’ understanding of themselves as a microcosm within the macrocosm – the Universe, the Universum; more precisely, the presence of what was called by K. Jaspers “discovery” of “personality” – the fact of human awareness about their involvement in the transcendent very foundation of the world (K. Jaspers’ quote: “... a person realizes being in general, itself and its limits”; “...learns the absolute in depths of self-awareness and clarity of the transcendent world”²; “at axial age, the opening of what later became known as mind and personality took place”³);
- locality (a manifestation of the phenomenon of “axial age” not on the scale of the entire globe, but only within three of its relatively small spatial areas: at the West, in India and China – “three centers of spiritual radiation” according to K. Jaspers terminology);
 - registration of urgent spiritual crisis (“spiritual chaos”) and development of the idea of “salvation” from a spiritual “catastrophe”;
 - comprehension of world religions as a direct “product” of “axial age”, which was finally implemented and the concept of “salvation”;
 - fixation of the fact that a person realizes own historicity and origin and emergence of the related need to create all sorts of periodization of historical time;
 - K. Jaspers’ evaluation of “axial” era as the era which completion was marked by the creation of great empires;
 - a statement of the sharp transition from myth to logos, that is the origin of philosophy and the beginning of active and deliberate philosophical reflection on the meaning of mythological texts and therefore “transformation” of the latter, their “comprehension at great depth”.

In our opinion, the abovementioned list of characteristic traits of “axial age” just proves conclusively that putting forward as the main theoretical postulate the idea of “axial age” as the starting point of world

¹ Ясперс, К. (1991). *Смысл и назначение истории*. Москва: Политиздат, 35.

² Ясперс, К. (1991). *Смысл и назначение истории*. Москва: Политиздат, 33.

³ Ясперс, К. (1991). *Смысл и назначение истории*. Москва: Политиздат, 34-35.

history, the definition of which meaning would shed light on the essence of all history of the mankind (the first visual image of axis), K. Jaspers at the same time, did not provide any substantiated evidence in favor of this idea. On the contrary, the whole argument of the German thinker directed, oddly enough, on the other – to confirm the thesis of the presence of different types of synchronous transformations during the “axial age”, and this, in general, corresponds the semantics of the second visual image of axis – the axis as a vertical, which crosses a horizontal.

Exactly such paradoxical situation does confirm the existence of “white spots” in the concept of K. Jaspers, i.e. existence of open critical questions that have remained open. The table below aims to demonstrate the available range of such “unanswered questions” in Jaspers’ theory of “axial age”.

Type of synchronous transformation	Unanswered questions
Cultures of the “axial age” produce their “spiritual product” autonomously.	But what are the reasons for such autonomy? What gave the possibility to be spiritually self-reliant?
In the “axial age” emerges spiritual (ideological) parallelism (uniformity) of “spiritual processes” in terms of their content.	But didn’t this type of spiritual parallelism take place before the “axial age” – particularly in the Bronze Age cultures?
“Axial age” develops the idea of transcendence (personalistic idea, the idea of “discovery” of “personality”).	But did this idea arise at this exactly historic time? Or was it earlier? Wasn’t it in the Bronze Age? After all, a theory of the human aura was developed in the culture of ancient Egypt.
Essential attribute of the “axial age” is such characteristics as locality.	But why did “axial” cultures develop in those particular parts of the world? And why did only in those places?
In the “axial age” emerges spiritual crisis (according to K. Jaspers “catastrophe”, “spiritual precipice”).	But what is the essence of this spiritual crisis?
In the “axial age” emerges the idea of “salvation”.	But from what is that “salvation”?
World religions emerged as a “product” of the “axial age”.	But can we consider emergence of world religions as chronological boundaries of the “axial age”?
In the “axial age” historical consciousness wakes up, thus bringing forth to the first periodization of the “axial age”.	But why did the need to comprehend the past history arise exactly at that moment? Why didn’t it arise earlier?
The “axial age” was completed by creation of powerful empires (like the Oriental despotisms of the Bronze Age).	But what was the reason for their formation? And why did they appear just than? And why did such type as oriental despotisms?
In the “axial age” took place transition from myth to logos associated with the origin of philosophy, and with purposeful reflection on the meaning of mythological texts.	But why did just than, in the “axial” period, emerge a need to explain a content of mythological texts through the language of philosophy? Why did just than emerge what we now call “thinking of the second step”, i.e. thinking about thinking?

This list of unanswered questions is the best evidence to prove the opinion that K. Jaspers only managed to capture the phenomenon of the “axial age”, but could not explain it. However, in our view, answers to most of these questions are possible after comparative analysis of K. Jaspers’ and M. Chmykhov’s concepts.

We believe that comparative analysis of the concepts of these two scientists should be based on the simulation of historical process that can solve precisely this kind of difficult and yet fundamentally important issues. Simulation method allows not only to outline the general contours of the concepts of various authors, but to reach the solution of complex problems (“white spots”), which are not solved in the framework of one of the authors, but may still be solved by “superimposing” concepts of different authors on each other. The example of such approach just may be the comparative analysis of K. Jaspers’ and M. Chmykhov’s concepts aimed at defining the essence of the “axial age” and its role in the context of world history. The main objective of the proposed model will be to superimpose K. Jaspers’ “axial age” concept on M. Chmykhov’s idea on dynamics of ideological models within the cosmic stage of mankind’s worldview.

M. Chmykhov is well-known in scientific community as the author of unique in its kind cosmoarchaeological concept of historical transformation. Paying attention to the cyclical nature of the cultural-historical process, as its main phases (in particular – historical eras and their periods) chronologically consistent with the rhythm of cosmic cycles, M. Chmykhov was not limited by mere stating of that cyclicity; he tries to follow the general line of deployment of the global history, proceeding to the issue of its direction, and thus – linearity. Furthermore, the main criterion for development of his linear paradigm of history is, fixed in the materials of archaeological sites and traced throughout all of recorded human history, dynamics of worldview models of humanity.

Insightful in its entirety research of specific material and spiritual culture, starting from the earliest stage of anthropogenesis (from the Stone Age), allowed M. Chmykhov to conclude that there are two fundamentally different systems of human worldview:

- **precosmic**, based on the tjurunga cult and ideas about totem;
- **cosmic**, for which is typical understanding of existing laws in nature and the Universe, understanding rhythm of planetary processes, their impact on life of both society and an individual.

Precosmic system of worldview emerged in the days of primitive society: it covered Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods. On the next historical era – the era proto-Neolithic – cosmic system of worldview emerged, which, according to M. Chmykhov still continues. If the core of worldview model of precosmic stage is the **idea of totem**, the notional center for worldview model of the cosmic stage is the **idea of universal cosmic “law”**. This “law” has received the status of “universal” precisely because absolutely everything in the Universe is subjected to its action: space, nature, climate and, what is extremely essential, society and an individual person as important and integral components.

It should also be noted that later the idea of universal cosmic “law” was widely used in philosophical systems of leading ancient civilizations. What is interesting, having identical essential characteristics, this “law” received specific names in different regions of the world: “Rta” in India, “Tao” in China, “Maat” in Egypt (interesting is ancient Egyptian myth “Pharaoh Menkaure and the goddess Maat”), “Me” in Mesopotamia, “Arta” in Iran, and so on.

Since the proto-Neolithic era mythological consciousness obtains a whole range of cosmological ideas, namely the idea dismembered Universe, the idea of two worlds (the world of the living and the world of the dead), the idea of the threefold Universe, the idea of three stages of world creation and threefold creative force, the idea of universal cosmic “law” as the basis and essence of the model of organized Universe, the idea of zodiac version of this model, and so on.

M. Chmykhov did not limit the study of the dynamics of human worldview systems to a statement that there are two basic models – precosmic and cosmic. The researcher also had a goal to trace whether there were any specific worldview changes directly within the cosmic system. In order to briefly explain the nature of these changes during proto-Neolithic – late Iron Age, for each of the eras we’ll apply an ideological “formula”, which main components are:

- **N** = predominance of **natural** forces in the worldview, associated with focus on the idea of universal cosmic “law”, over social;
- **S** = predominance of **social** factors in the worldview over natural.

Variations of this “formula”, which indicate character of the dynamic changes in the system of human worldview during the cosmic stage, are demonstrated in the following table:

The proto-Neolithic Era	The Neolithic Era	The Bronze Age	The Early Iron Age	The Late Iron Age (modern era)
N>S	N>>S	N>=S	S>N	S>>>N

As the table shows, predominance of natural forces over social was typical for worldview matrix of the proto-Neolithic, Neolithic and Bronze cultures. Only since the Early Iron Age tendency is evident to transform worldview “formula” **N>S**, tested for thousands of years, in absolutely opposite – **S>N**.

Thus, in the proto-Neolithic era when the cosmic system of the worldview was formed, natural forces clearly dominate over social factors in the worldview (**N>S**). In the Neolithic era took place deepening of proto-Neolithic worldview, associated with formation of ideas about the second stage of the zodiac, the phenomenon of astronomical precession, etc., which generally corresponds to the **N>>S**. The Bronze Age was culmination of the worldview, grounded on the deification of the natural cycle, as evidenced by deliberate orientation of absolute majority of social strata into the system of cosmic thinking, because

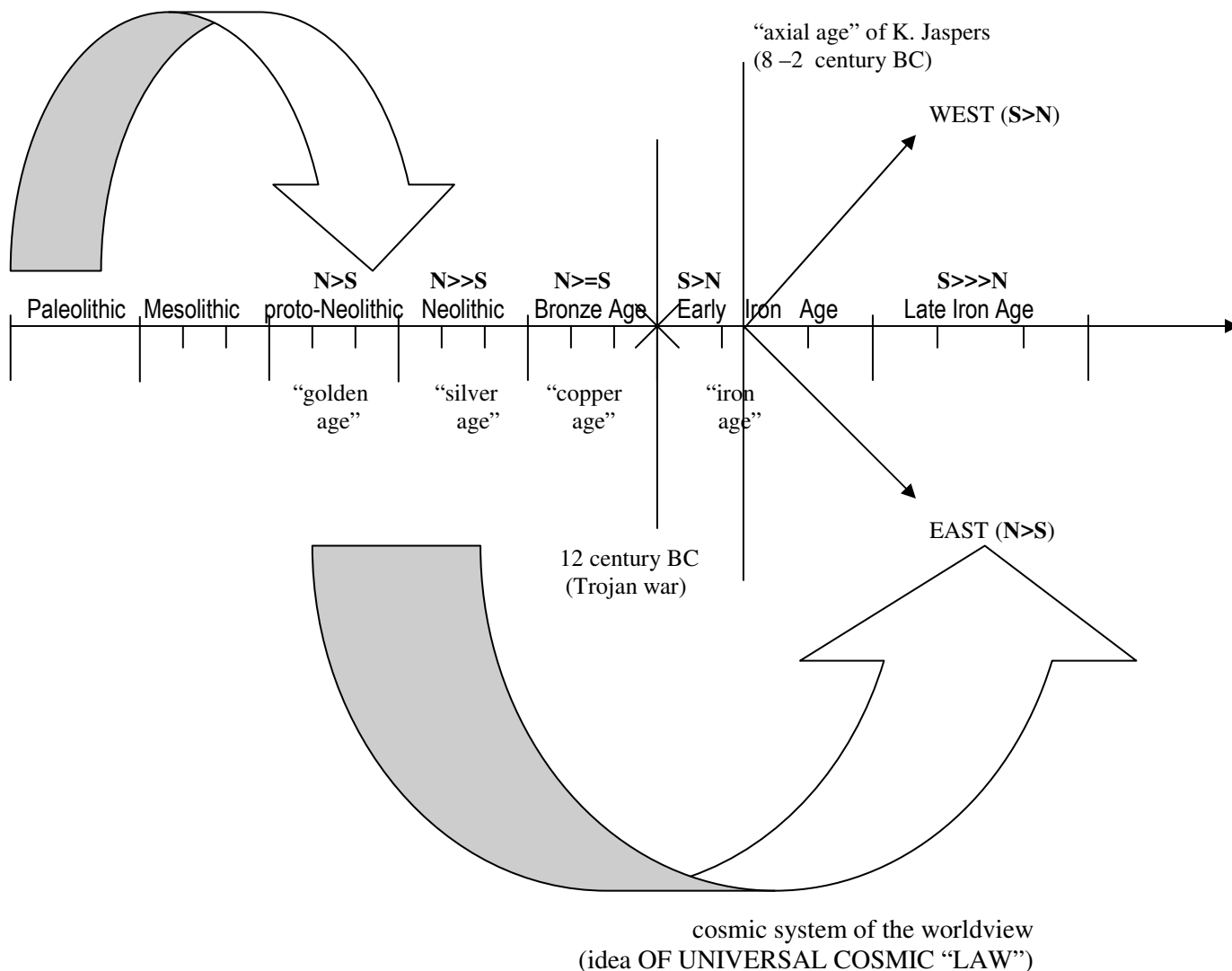
such orientation was authorized by principles of governance based on the idea of a ruler as a regent of God on Earth (it is consistent with $N \geq S$).

Transformation of the worldview matrix in the early Iron Age ($S > N$) is described by M. Chmykhov as follows: "...this transfer in the worldview from natural to social forces, a gradual departure from coordination of human activities with the cycles of nature and as a result – the loss of many knowledge, partial reconsideration of symbols, the decline of the role of the Zodiac"¹.

As for the worldview matrix of the modern historical era (the late Iron Age), so taking into account tracing of the main stages of Western civilization, we cannot discard that it was the Renaissance with its anthropocentric worldview attitude that "untied hands" of technical and ecological civilizations of Modern and Contemporary eras. Moreover, current apogee of this undoubted priority of social forces over natural, clearly indicates that the worldview matrix of the Modern era is most likely $S \gg \gg N$.

Thus, the transformation of fundamental worldview "formula" $N > S$ into its absolute antipode happens, according to M. Chmykhov, since the Early Iron Age. But the "axial" period, defined by K. Jaspers, was fixed within precisely this historical era (in particular – within the middle of the three periods, which synchronizes with the chronological limits of the "axial age" – 8-2 century BC). Finally, after "superimposing" theoretical "parameters" of both concepts (concepts by M. Chmykhov and K. Jaspers) in schematic form we received the next visual model:

precosmic system of the worldview (idea of TOTEM)



¹ Чмихов, М.О., Кравченко, Н.М., Черняков, І.Т. (1992). *Археологія та стародавня історія України: Курс лекцій*. Київ: Либідь, 169.

Due to this scheme, it is obvious that K. Jaspers' "axial age" coincides with the historical moment, which, according to M. Chmykhov, had a risk of transformation of fundamental worldview "formula" $N>S$.

Finally, based on comparative analysis of K. Jaspers' and M. Chmykhov's concepts, we have reasons to conclude that the cause of spiritual breakthrough of the "axial age" cultures and the cause of the "axial age" was primarily a response to the situation of spiritual crisis, induced by a very real threat of transforming the fundamental, tested for thousands of years, worldview "formula" $N>S$ (*priority of natural forces in the worldview over social*), based on the concept of universal cosmic "law", according to which life of society and an individual need to be consistent and balanced with the rhythm of the Cosmos and Nature, into its absolute antipode – $S>N$ (*predominance of social factors in the worldview over natural*). Now, in particular, becomes clear the idea of "salvation" which sounds so passionately, for example, in the Indian Upanishads and in the dramatic works of ancient Greece (recall in this respect the tragedy of Sophocles "Antigone").

So, we can confidently say that all the great amount of religious concepts of the "axial age" arises, in fact, with the one important goal, with the one "supertask" – in any case, under any circumstances to prevent change of established (tested for thousands of years) worldview priorities, i.e. to prevent possible dangerous worldview transformation of $N>S$ "formula" into opposite, and therefore to prevent deployment of urgent spiritual crisis, literally – to be saved from it. So, it turns out, that was the real essence of the idea of "salvation" stated by K. Jaspers!

However, the "axial age" (as it is shown on the scheme) should be also considered as a point of **bifurcation** (lat. *bifurcus* – "bidental"; eng. *bifurcation* – "branching", "furcation", "differentiation") of the West and East cultures. This means that West and East have differently responded to the crisis in the spiritual sphere in the middle of the first millennium BC – that is, during the "axial age". And the East, so to speak, have done everything possible to prevent adverse scenario of probable changes in the fundamental worldview matrix, and, as a result, the East indeed "defended" $N>S$ "formula" and left it intact; the West, at the same time, despite everything failed to achieve the similar purpose (as a result – $S>N$).

Of course, a limited size of the article does not allow giving explanations on all (or at least most) of the "white spots" in the concept of K. Jaspers. However, it is necessary to claim the main: undoubtedly productive (and even without exaggeration, brilliant!) theoretical thesis of K. Jaspers regarding the "axial age" as a starting notional point of world history should not be lost in the course of further academic research. This particular thesis must receive a convincing evidence base in the future, as unfortunately it didn't happen under K. Jaspers.

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