



The emergence of MSP vs the spread of transcendentalist religion

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The emergence of MSP vs the spread of transcendentalist religion.

A Comment on Turchin, Whitehouse et al.

Alan Strathern

As a thoroughly un-cliometric historian, I am unable to interrogate the core methodology deployed here, the use of regression analyses, and the crucial question of how sociopolitical complexity may be associated with MSP without being identified as a cause of it. Instead, I will try to consider how far the findings match up with some arguments and empirical work produced in the humanities.

The paper arises out of the broader interest of the Seshat team in the research questions animating the literature on the Axial Age. My own work has drawn upon this field in order to advance a conceptualisation of two different forms of religion: transcendentalism and immanentism. These terms are defined at length elsewhere (Strathern 2019) but for present purposes, transcendentalism refers to many of the distinguishing features of the world religions such as a concern for otherworldly salvation – and indeed a profound ethicization of religious life.

The authors recognize MSP as an important defining feature of the post-Axial or transcendentalist religions, but they single it out as a distinctive complex in its own right. This has some significant analytical pay-offs. It illuminates the point that the ethicization of the religious sphere had a much longer and more widespread history than the Axial Age paradigm generally allows for. For example, Ancient Egypt is usually excluded from the paradigm but the analytical narrative makes clear that it bore witness to some important developments which should stimulate a rethink. By measuring moralisation across a number of criteria, the authors are able to produce a subtler analysis than a mere absent/present coding would allow for, while the inclusion of non-agentive mechanisms incorporates the great Indic traditions in a way that the discourse of polytheism-to-monotheism cannot.

On the other hand, there is something unsatisfactory about a form of measurement that has Egypt reach its maximum value in terms of MSP by 1500 BCE, such that the arrival of Christianity and Islam – dispalying vastly more comprehensively moralised forms of religiosity – make no difference. In this instance, at least, the coding is not devised to capture the importance of the great revolution in the role of ethics that transcendentalism represents. It were these traditions that rendered a moralised conception of the universe as a superordinate value for all members of society, erected systems of ethics that ran counter to certain kinds of individual self-interest – and which yet developed an awesome competitive advantage in cultural evolutionary terms such that they came to snuff out nearly all other forms of religion. Perhaps this revolution is captured in the chronology of the full run of NGAs, however?

In identifying intensifying warfare, military technology and agricultural development as the principal causal factors for MSP, the analysis touches upon some themes that literature in the humanities has advanced as conditions underlying the emergence of the Axial Age in all its core regions. However, that literature (e.g. Bellah 2011, Graeber 2011, Puett 2022) sees these as bound up with the rise of the state, even if the key ‘breakthroughs’ in axiality occurred not at the heart of empires but in more plural societies on their margins. The development of iron and other military technologies promoting military-fiscal pressures, mass standing armies, novel forms of taxation, monetisation, literacy, urbanisation and hierchicalisation, have all been

mentioned as forming the essential backdrop. All these are, of course, factors associated with the development of socio-political complexity. Assuming that the post-Axial religions are the most important carriers of MSP characteristics, this would be consistent with the author's findings that SPC precedes MSP, but would sit less well with the suggestion that SPC is causally irrelevant.

Do we need to adhere to a functionalist explanation of the moralizing religions that emerged from this foment? I have suggested that one of the defining features of the Axial Age intellectual movements is their confrontation of relativism. The relative pace of social change combined with the capacity to support new intellectual classes, seems to have stripped away a sense of the givenness of inherited tradition and placed immanentism under cognitive strain. Thus what transpired was a crisis of meaning to which moralizing transcendentalism, in its various forms, was the answer. If we want to retain a functionalist logic, we may be able to speculate that ideologies which provided new forms of meaning in turn generated greater forms of social power than rivals. The authors note that declines in MSP are particularly rare: within a cultural evolutionary framework this might indicate that their pro-social power proved useful regardless of whether the triggering conditions were in place or not. But then would we not see some corresponding rise or at least stabilization of SPC as a consequence? We can also consider whether ideologies have other competitive advantages beyond their social utility.

It would be worth exploring whether the finding that SPC adds little to the causality of MSP reflects the fact that the analysis does not distinguish between the conditions that promote the *emergence* of MSP (i.e. generated autonomously within an NGA) and those which promote the *adoption* of a moralizing religion from outside. For what we know of the spread of moralizing religions indicates great differences between these. Only a few core regions of Eurasia, affected by the conditions noted above, developed the great moralizing traditions – largely if not entirely autonomously. But once formed, a religion like Christianity, Islam or Buddhism has the capacity to thrive in *any* setting – in any degree of sociopolitical complexity, or agricultural development. Consider, for example their adoption by extremely diverse and small scale societies of Papua New Guinea in the late twentieth century. This owes something to the doctrinalist nature of moralizing religions, as the authors note, but to many other of their distinctive features of transcendentalism well. Indeed, one striking pattern of world history is that where these 'transcendentalist' forms expand into societies with (generally much less moralized) immanentist systems, they are almost predetermined to be victorious given enough time. One reason for this, I have argued, is the greater capacity for conceptual control (see McCauley and Lawson 2002) inherent in the new principle of otherworldly salvation. In certain very particular settings, immanentist systems can become vulnerable to criticisms that they have not produced worldly effects. Transcendentalisms also promise to enhance people's control of their environment in this life, but they are rather invulnerable should good fortune not be forthcoming; indeed, setbacks may stiffen rather than weaken resolve. In military terms: Jehovah is a victory-granting god of war, but should defeat in fact be the result, then real justice will come in the afterlife (see Strathern 2019).

Two points of relevance emerge. First, such features of cognitive strength and meaning making might provide a competitive advantage to a tradition whether or not they also provide one to the polity at large through social cohesion etc. Second, it may be that while the level of SPC is irrelevant to the propensity to *adopt* a moralizing religion, it is causally significant to the few cases of their autonomous *emergence* as the most important carriers of MSP.

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