Seth Abrutyn

Reconceptualizing the Axial Age as the re-emergence of transcendence: Why religio-cultural entrepreneurship matters

> Somehow or other [humans] must have a sense of the whole if they are to live; they must have something to believe in and to commit themselves to. [...Humans] must act in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability and consequently they must have faith; they must be willing to take the gamble, the risk of faith. In this sense some symbolization of transcendent reality seems inescapable, whether religious in a traditional sense or not.
> (Bellah 1970: 206)

The sudden and concomitant emergence of several new religious systems in India, China, and Israel—and, in the Greek case, both religious systems (e. g., Pythagoreanism) and philosophical systems—in the first millennium BCE has periodically become the object of interest for social scientists, philosophers, and historians (Arnason et al. 2005; Bellah and Joas 2012; Eisenstadt 1986b; Voegelin 1956 – 74). It was Karl Jaspers (1953) who coined the phrase "Axial Age" (see the Introduction to this volume) as he laid out an argument that history "turned," so to speak, such that contemporary humans look to the religio-cultural changes of this period and not to the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Harappan, or ancient Chinese cultural systems when searching for the ultimate grounds of reality. Though there are serious debates about *what* happened (Arnason 2005; Eisenstadt 1986a; Wittrock 2005), *why* it happened (Abrutyn 2014; Armstrong 2006; Bellah 2011), and whether it was *Axial* (Bellah 2005), *axial* (Bondarenko 2011; Dalferth 2012), or neither (Assmann 2012; Mullins et al. 2018; Pollock 2005; Runciman 2012), it is undeniable that cultural revolutions rocked the foundations of these societies. For many scholars, these new religious and philosophical systems were remarkable in that they were arguably "breakthroughs" in which transcendental conceptualizations of the supernatural emerged in human history for the first time (Eisenstadt 1982; Humphreys 1975; Lerro 2000; Momigliano 1975; Schwartz 1975). For the West, this meant a "God" and supernatural world *outside* of the natural world, while for the East the principle was often expressed in impersonal forces like the *Tao* or in the Brahman-Atman dualism. What is "Axial" about the Axial Age remains fiercely debated (Bellah 2005; Abrutyn 2013b; Mullins et al. 2018), and germane to this paper, it remains an open question just how "new" a transcendent supernatural world was in the first millennium BCE.

In the chapter below, I offer a critical analysis of the Axial Age literature, refracted through an historical-comparative sociological lens that challenges the

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typical reading of the Axial Age. Building on previous work that has largely avoided examining this question explicitly, I argue that the ethnographic, archaeological, and sociological "record" contradicts the conventional interpretations of the Axial Age as unique. That is, the idea that humans "discovered" epistemologies or spheres of "social" life external to, above, and beyond the everyday mundane order in the Axial Age does not hold up when interrogated from a social scientific perspective. Rather, this assumption rests on western-centric biases that continue to (1) treat non-literate societies as so different that they sit outside of comparison, (2) enshrine the nineteenth-century false equivalence of progress with cultural evolution and social change, and (3) demarcate "eras" or "epochs" as discrete stages or steps in human evolution. To be sure, these biases have become implicit whereas two centuries ago they were proudly proclaimed as axiomatic.

In short, this chapter looks to answer two interrelated questions: First, what is transcendence from a sociological perspective and second, if transcendence existed before the Axial Age, what, if anything, was unique about the Axial Age? To answer these questions, the heart of this chapter is built around an historical-comparative evolutionary analysis that does several things. First, it provides some evidence for the existence of a transcendent supernatural belief in non-literate societies. Second, it examines how the rise of political entrepreneurship and, consequently, political autonomy some 5,000 years ago began a process by which the legitimate and practical right to access or experience the world above and beyond was increasingly consolidated and centralized in the hands of a small cadre of actors. And, third, it demonstrates that the Axial Age was "axial" in so far as religious entrepreneurs began to challenge the status quo, carve out religious spheres distinct from the political sphere, and return access—albeit on their terms—to a significant portion of the population. In a sense, the Axial Age was notable in that access to directly experiencing and communing with the supernatural was pried loose from the political and religious elite who had monopolized it as one more resource to be tightly controlled and returned to a significant proportion of the population.

Put differently, the needs of political entrepreneurship—clearly present as early as the appearance of the first chiefs (Johnson and Earle 2000)—and, eventually, of imperialism (Graeber 2011) are *practical* and *pragmatic*, and the supernatural, as something above the natural, became grounded in the exercise of power; and, therefore, it was stripped of its "super" nature, grounded in the city-state, and guarded carefully by priestly specialists and kings who derived legitimate authority from the "secrets" of the supernatural (Chang 1983; Richards and Van Buren 2000; van de Mieroop 2004). Hence, on the one hand, the post-Axial world did not feature some new cognitive or epistemic leaps indicative of

some biological or neurological evolution in humanity (cf. Donald 1993). On the other hand, we are in position to retain the usefulness of "Axiality" in that what was new was a set of new entrepreneurs (religio-cultural) and a new autonomous institutional sphere (religion), both of which expanded the base of material and symbolic resources (and, thereby made societies able to grow bigger and more complex) while concomitantly creating new centers of power and domination with which the masses had to contend. Before delineating this evolutionary analysis, we turn to some definitional work that lays the groundwork for the essay.

1 Conceptual clarity

Generally speaking, many scholars tacitly or explicitly accept the argument that the first millennium BCE was also an age of transcendence (Arnason 2005; Schwartz 1975; Stone 1986; Weil 1975). In Schwartz's (1975: 3) words, the "common underlying impulse in all these 'axial' movements [...] might be called a strain toward transcendence [or] a kind of standing back and looking beyond." That is, religious innovations occurred in Israel, China, Greece, and India that introduced the first instances of a supramundane world, force, and/or god that resided outside of the secular, mundane sphere of reality. This disjunction between the "here" and the "there," as Eisenstadt (1986b) terms it, subsequently became the foundation upon which other distinctive cultural changes have been described: the age of criticism (Momigliano 1975), of second order (Elkana 1986) or theoretic thinking (Bellah 2011), of historicity, agency, and reflexivity (Wittrock 2005), and of unique soteriologies and eschatologies (Weber 1946). Additionally, this "breakthrough" provided religious elites the bedrock for claiming special authority over all matters sacred (Blenkinsopp 1995; Eisenstadt 1982; Humphreys 1975; Thapar 1975; Wei-Ming 1986). Thus, in the case of a significant proportion of Axial Age scholarship, transcendence is inextricably tied to a religious conceptual framework that characterizes pre-Axial worlds as steeped in a "grounded" or immanent supernatural world.

Stepping back for a moment, the question of what transcendence is, begs asking. If we strip it of its religious content—content that incidentally betrays a western-centric vision of the supramundane founded on Yahwism—to transcend means to go outside of the ego or self and to go beyond the physical and temporal limits of everyday reality. From a contemporary, western mind saturated in the practical logic of science and knowing nothing but the disenchanted world of rationalized bureaucracy, the thesis that the Axial Age (in particular in the west) is the moment in which a "there" became highly distinct from the

"here" makes sense. Yet, this thesis ignores a diverse body of facts that challenge its plausibility. To be sure, these new religions were notable for the decidedly intellectual turn they took vis-à-vis the "flatter" Mesopotamian and Egyptian religions (Machinist 1986), and thereby, they did "stand back and look beyond." Religious intellectuals were trying to deal with what they perceived as a disjunction between the mundane and sacred, yet, they were also purposefully articulating a new worldview for broader sets of strata than the ruling elite or aristocracy, and thus transcendence was also something to be experienced. Social scientists and philosophers have tended to view transcendence, then, in its intellectualized form, despite the fact that what may have been most radical about the priestly and prophetic movements was their populism and their attempt to pull burgeoning middle classes into their orbit (see, for instance, Abrutyn's [2015b] discussion of the Israelite axial age or Thapar's [1975] consideration of the Indian case) by providing the means to experience transcendence in ritual (e.g., pilgrimage [Turner 1973; Smith 1997]) and through various channels of communication with the "distant" supernatural. That is, transcendence, as in an epistemology positing a chasm between the sacred and profane worlds, was less a radical break and more an ideological weapon used by upstart religious elites pursuing social mobility and, in some cases, power.[1] A transcendent sacred world could be "invented" only because human physiology had evolved to be sensitive to, to pursue, and to yearn for transcendence—for the experience of society or the collective outside of our corporeal, embodied existence; a capacity identified a century ago in Durkheim's (1995 [1912]) great work on religion, and which has support in the social sciences (Lawler 2001; Collins 2004) and neurosciences (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008; Asma and Gabriel 2019).

1.1 Durkheim's elementary forms

For all of the legitimate methodological criticisms of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1995 [1912]), his powerful analysis reveals the fundamental function of *all* ritualized behavior as capable

1 Importantly, there are good reasons one might distinguish between transcendence/immanence and the sacred/profane. Sociologists, particularly materialists, tend to collapse the distinction between the two, arguing as Durkheim (1995) did that a god or supernatural force is an external representation of the collective, as are all things deemed sacred such as physical and temporal space. Thus, transcendence in this essay refers to the clear demarcation both of the supernatural as beyond or above the natural world *and* the experience or ability to commune with said supernatural in sacred time and space.

of transcendence. Famously, he concluded that recurring interactions generate powerful emotions that demand attribution; because they feel external to the individual, humans search for external sources of *collective effervescence*. The emotions eventually crystallize in physical, social, and ideational objects (e. g., names of the tribe) that externally represent the source of collective emotion, and these representations come to shape and define the sense of group-ness people develop through recurring interaction. Furthermore, these representations act upon members of the group during everyday life as reminders of past ritual and signals for anticipating future encounters. In Durkheim's words: "if the totem is the symbol of both the god and society, is this not because the god and the society are one and the same? [...] Thus the god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be none other than the clan itself, but the clan transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal that serves as totem" (Durkheim 1995: 208). Assembly—whether religious or secular—submerges the self in the many, generates beliefs that emerge *post hoc* but that come to be a taken-for-granted schema for why and how one loses self, and that ultimately cause "society" to transcend mere experience. Durkheim's basic insight, then, is that (a) human society, and therefore survival, is dependent upon people being motivated to assemble frequently because assembly (b) submerges the self and (c) brings her into direct contact with the abstract "group" as over and above her.

The ethnographic record strongly supports Durkheim's assertion. Summarizing the logic of ritual, across time and space, Eliade (1996: 32) concludes that "by transforming all his physiological acts into ceremonies, primitive man strove to 'pass beyond,' to thrust himself out of time (and change) into eternity"; a conclusion strongly supported by various ethnographic anthologies (Eliade 1959; Lowie 1936; Radin 1957). In particular, liminal rituals, or rituals designed to demarcate significant status passages, have been shown in detail to plunge individuals into a physical and temporal reality in which the self is lost and the "communitas" is ever-present (Turner 1969; Bell 1992; Rappaport 1999). And, finally, collective memory, as embodied in physical geography and architecture as well as in ritual, has long been used as a means to transcendence (Assmann 2011) by restoring "ever again the continuity between the present moment and the societal tradition, placing the experiences of the individual and the various groups of the society in the context of history (fictitious or not) that transcends them all" (Berger 1969: 40 – 41).

Besides the ethnographic record, research in neuroscience, archaeology, and modern social psychology corroborate the idea that transcendence is a ubiquitous capacity of humans, and a strongly desired, positive experience. First, while it is still open for debate, there is growing consensus that modern humans'

neuro-structure came into being approximately 50 to 70 thousand years ago (Klein and Edgar 2002); thus, whatever neurological capacities the hunter-gatherers had, or their sedentary descendants who first started settling in villages about 10 to 12 thousand years ago, we share with them today as did the pre- and post-Axial people (Boehm 2012; Turner and Maryanski 2009). And, what do we know about these capacities? It is clear that because as individuals we lack natural defenses against threats, evolution appears to have worked on parts of our brains that facilitated the formation and maintenance of groups. We are predisposed to pay very close attention to our emotions and others (Ekman 1982), attribute the source of the emotion (Turner 2007), build strong social bonds by way of emotional anchors (Lawler 1992; Lawler et al. 2009), and to transform whatever biological ego and consciousness we are born with into a social self, replete with identities and statuses inseparable from the groups that they are anchored in (Franks 2006). We are hardwired, in essence, to *need* others (Cozoline 2014), as they are the key source through which we come to understand and make sense of who we are (Burke and Stets 2009; Goffman 1959, Heise and MacKinnon 2010); and, we are hardwired to frequently interact with individuals and groups of individuals that substitute self-interest with a sense of solidarity, a source of joint task responsibility, jointly produced goods and services, and a sense of common history and destiny (Turner 2010). Research clearly demonstrates how common it is for individuals to grow emotionally and socially close to another person such that the boundaries between our self and another is blurred to the point that the other's experiences and pain can be felt in some cases (Summers-Effler 2004); this same thread of research has found this same process can occur between individuals and *groups* of individuals (Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe 2001; Mackie et al. 2009), and, presumably, between our self and what Mead referred to as the "Generalized" Other, or the group's moral conscience (Boehm 2012).

In short, in lieu of big teeth or claws, humans survived on the savannah by way of group solidarity. Our brains seem to have evolved concomitantly with the development of group hunting strategies and reciprocal exchanges (Bowles and Gintis 2011). Rituals are the primary means of transcending time and space, and the individual self; and ritual is ubiquitous to society. Thus, we humans not only have the capacity, but have always had the means to transcend. If this is true, we must ask again the two questions: what was unique about the Axial Age and why does it seem as though it was marked by a set of transcendental breakthroughs? Arguably, the simple answer to this question is that what separated the non-literate groups Durkheim was interested in from post-Axial societies was the level of physical, temporal, social, and symbolic differentiation possible: in the former, clever and arduous means were required to create physical and temporal

spaces distinct from the world people inhabited, whereas post-Axial worlds could build temples apart from homes and palaces and impose holy days that broke up the economic rounds. The appearance of transcendental breakthroughs is, in fact, a double-maneuver: the construction of autonomous religious spheres, which were unique to the Axial Age and the greater access, among the masses, to transcendental rituals (and, therefore, to sacred time and space). In terms of the latter, we will return to this aspect of the Axial Age shortly, when we examine different types of societies and their political, religious, and social structure. In terms of the former, we must consider what institutional autonomy means and how entrepreneurship came to reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space for a significant proportion of the population.

1.2 Entrepreneurship and evolution

In previous work, I have argued that the Axial Age was a clear-cut example of sociocultural evolution (Abrutyn 2013a; 2014; 2015b). Cultural evolution goes by many guises, but the one that interests us here is the one predicated on group-level selection (Boyd and Richerson 1992; Wilson 2001). Because humans are conscious and able to plan, sociocultural evolution is very often purposive instead of blind. However, contingencies, unintended consequences, and the reactions of other social units always affect the trajectory of cultural evolution (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015). Selection works on two levels: at the group level, it is a question of whether or not a group's normative, symbolic, and organizational framework generates sufficient solidarity such that individuals submit themselves to the group's greater interests; and, thus, any collective decisions feel binding and are obeyed. At the institutional level, selection occurs in so far as any given group's set of frameworks are embedded in the macrostructure and culture such that non-group members' realities are affected. Thus, a religious sect can develop a set of frames that pull its members in tightly, and as such, can weather any centripetal forces, while this sect's frames do not in fact affect non-members. Unlike biological evolution, then, we are not interested in fitness *per se*, because what may be fit for the group whose frames are dominant may not, in fact, be "fit" in objective terms for others. What matters is how successful that group, or what are referred to as *institutional entrepreneurs* (Eisenstadt 1964), are in securing enough independence to (1) institutionalize their frameworks and (2) reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic reality (Abrutyn 2013b).

Cultural evolution, as I am referring to it, does not "unfold" naturally or in a linear direction. It twists and turns, and these "paths" are the result of institu-

tional entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is predicated on certain groups of people recognizing their collective interests, developing new frames, pursuing structural and cultural resources by finding new means of material and symbolic resources, and purposively striving to draw non-members into their social reality. The first clear examples of entrepreneurship can be found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, and the Indus Valley about five thousand years ago. In all of these places, political entrepreneurs began working to draw discrete boundaries between the political sphere and the kinship sphere (Eisenstadt 1963)—the latter of which, up until that point, had been the dominant source of social reality (Turner and Maryanski 2009). Normatively, political autonomy meant the creation of new patterns of social interaction concerning the use and exchange of power, justice, and even sacredness as well as political goals whose "formation, pursuit, and implementation became largely independent of other groups, and were governed mostly by *political criteria and by consideration of political exigency*" (Eisenstadt 1963: 19; emphasis added); symbolically, for instance, political "architecture" was distinct from kinship in scale, size, and ornateness (Richards and Van Buren 2000); and, organizationally, discrete roles (king-subject) and groups (e. g., a bureaucracy) became the primary source of social order in political spheres vis-à-vis the family in the kinship sphere (Adams 1966). And though political autonomy was not instantaneous, it was eventually successful in altering the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic reality of most humans subjected to the newly formed political spheres (Scott 1998). As we shall see below, the Axial Age reveals similar processes, but rather than bear witness to political autonomy we find the appearance of religious spheres that are, for the first time in human history, autonomous from the polity and kinship worlds: an historical process, incidentally, recognized as differentiation (Eisenstadt 2012) or "disembedding" (Taylor 2012) by others. That is, the Axial Age was characterized by a set of entrepreneurs who created a new set of normative, symbolic, and organizational frames, strove to institutionalize them in a physically, temporally, socially, and symbolically differentiated religious sphere, and, with varying success, reconfigured the lived experiences of a significant proportion of people (Abrutyn 2013b).

2 Transcendence and human societies

In the following section, I offer a general evolutionary account that rests on two basic assumptions: 1) humans have a strong desire to collectively assemble and commune with "society" in ways that allow them to experience something outside of, beyond, and above themselves; and 2) societies, or the social order, can-

not be stable for long without institutional arrangements designed to facilitate this communion. This communion may be rooted either in individually or collectively worshipping a deity or rituals designed to "plunge them again into the very source of religious life: assembled groups" (Durkheim 1995: 350). I begin by thinking about non-literate societies, and the conception of the supernatural and transcendence, as well as the means by which humans could transcend the everyday rounds. From there, I return to the two aforementioned key "stages" of human evolution: first, the rise of autonomous polities some five thousand years ago and then, second, the Axial Age.

2.1 Premodernity and its discontents

Premodernity, of course, is hard to nail down as it always includes pre-literate/non-literate/pre-historical peoples, while it also sometimes includes the "museum" religions of the "old" world and, definitely, the colonized and decimated societies of the "new" world. Yet any abstract dichotomy should be looked at with suspicion, as it is always invented by the privileged analyst (Smith 1998). Part of the dilemma is the fact that, while nonliterate peoples had "religion" *per se*, their religious spheres remained local and tightly tethered to their kinship systems of organization (Abrutyn 2013b); on the contrary, Axial religions were birthed in societies in which political spheres had attained already some level of autonomy vis-à-vis kinship systems. Hence, when Eisenstadt or other scholars take the empires of ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia as their contrast to the Axial Age, they intentionally or unintentionally omit pre-state societies from consideration. The material and cultural worlds of these pre-state societies were different in important ways from those of statist societies, whether pre- or post-Axial. Thus, it should be with extreme caution that modern scholars impose contemporary analytic models on pre-Axial societies.

For instance, the underlying values that 'primitive' people attributed to their supramundane world are often characterized as different from those of modern people. As Radin (1957: 6) notes, "the desire for success, for happiness, and for long life" shaped the primitive concern with communication with the supernatural, whereas we often assume Christianity's or Islam's adherents are seeking otherworldly (soteriological) values. That is, there is a nefarious presumption that people today, who live in societies that are deeply influenced by the "world" religions, have higher-order goals that preliterate peoples never had. This is simply not true. And while the small population sizes of these earlier societies precluded the emergence of complex organizational structures filled with semi- or full-time religious professionals, for the most part the average human,

then and now, has the same problems: securing enough food, being happy, and staving off death. In addition to these material interests, religious specialists, then and now, continue to deal with the same basic ideal or metaphysical problems: mortality, evil, and suffering (Geertz 1966). To be sure, although cultural storage through writing and textual authority expands our ability to "stand back and look beyond," we must always be careful when overestimating the impact of writing or underestimating the flexibility of oral cultures.

The idea pushed by Bellah (2011) and Elkana (1986), which is supported by dubious evolutionary psychology (Donald 1993), is that primitive humans were not reflective or theoretic; rather, they were mimetic creatures. This fits, of course, into the idea that the primitive mind and self were qualitatively different. However, this argument has not only been refuted quite extensively in Radin's (1957) and Lowie's (1936) syntheses of ethnographic data and Eliade's (1996) encyclopedic presentation of patterns across religions in time and space, but also by paleoarchaeology (Klein and Edgar 2002). All religions are built from the foundations of our big, reflective brains![2] They are, at their heart, all concerned with the same major problems which confront all humans and which are magnified by our big brains: physiological problems like death, ontological problems related to a coherent sense of meaning, and social problems related to intra- and inter-group dynamics. As such, when we consider pre-Axial religions—particularly, non-state societies—we find some surprises briefly alluded to earlier in this essay.

First, the idea of a transcendent supramundane sphere or entity is not unique to the Axial Age. The Yoruba of Africa, for instance, have a hymn that posits that above the sun, moon, and all things, "passes the eye of God. Nothing is hidden from him. [...] So then remember that you are always in the presence of God [and] some day he will give you your just reward" (Radin 1957: 18–19). Likewise, the Incans had a creator deity who they believed was "ever present" and unknowable (Radin 1957: 20), as did more "primitive" peoples like the Maori (Tregear 2013). Where high gods were absent, or had retreated from affecting people's lives in meaningful ways, ancestors continued to symbolize the group above and beyond the individual's specific time and place. In Guy Swanson's (1966: 55ff.) quantitative and more systematic analysis, we see that many of

2 This point should not be taken to suggest that preliterate religion is the same as contemporary religion, or that humans have not changed in significant ways. What it suggests, however, is that our brains have not evolved, although the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic worlds they must make sense of have. I realize there are legitimate criticisms of this type of "static" view of human cognition, but the evidence strongly supports the "evolved ape 'out of water'" story more convincingly then the punctuated cognitive evolution story.

these groups had "high" gods, some of which continued to matter for everyday life (e.g., the Cuna). Swanson also found evidence that some groups have conceptions of a soul and, in some cases, notions of reincarnation. Both of these concepts are very often connected with a supramundane world or transcendent reality. Of course, we see remnants of these high gods in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Assmann 2008; 2012), as well as in the Greek pantheon—the Zeus-Cronus narrative is found throughout the world in non-literate societies (Eliade 1996)—but, admittedly, they have become distant from the lived realities of the people. There are good reasons for this distance, and these will be addressed in greater detail below. But, for now, the fact that there *were* transcendent gods both contradicts the Axial thesis of transcendence and also serves as a key reason for religious entrepreneurship.

Second, to return to points made earlier, any study of initiation rituals and rites cannot help but see an embodied, enacted sense of transcendence *and*, consequently, underlying cosmologies that include transcendent notions of reality (Bell 1992; Rappaport 1999; Turner 1969). In funerals and puberty rites, the *communitas* or abstract generalized moral other transcends the individual participants, as the individual members are submerged in the collective. Durkheim (1995: 406ff.) was well aware of this, pointing out the collective, moral force felt in the effervescent emotions generated during these types of rituals; indeed, in other places, Durkheim (1982: 52ff.) noted that leaving an assembly of this sort, one could not help but conceptualize the collective emotions as *alien* and *external* to the individual's own mental images.

In essence, it is arguable just how unique the invention of transcendent conceptions of the supernatural was in the Axial Age. Humans had already conceptualized forces and deities as above, over, and beyond; and, in many cases, these forces were no more a part of the mundane world as Yahweh, Jesus, or the Tao were. Admittedly, of course, these pre-Axial societies may have lacked (a) the universality common among the visions of the moral community posited by Plato or the Buddha,[3] (b) systematized ethical soteriologies, and (c) monist notions of the supramundane. Yet, it is simply not true that the supramundane lacked transcendent notions. Rather, the world the gods could reign over was much smaller in size and scale; ethical salvation, in small-scale homogeneous societies, was less relevant to maintaining order than practical goals; and, the low levels of social differentiation precluded the need for a monolatrous or mon-

3 But they certainly did not lack a universal golden rule (Boehm 2012). It was the notion of "universal" that was constrained, as ascribed characteristics delimited who could belong to the moral community.

otheistic notion of the sacred, because there was little pressure to integrate groups that were neither disparate nor prone to schism. If religion, as sociologists like Durkheim, Bellah, and Peter Berger argue, is an externalized, symbolic representation of the collective reality of a people, why would nomadic foragers pursue salvation rather than solutions to the practical issues that dominated their lives? Thus, just like our pre-Axial descendants, we still pray for health; athletes, as substitutes for warriors, still attribute great feats to god's gifts; we still curse the gods when we fail or have accidents; we still wish people ill; we still pray for rain and sunshine, fertility and luck. And, just like the Axial/post-Axial transcendental religious visions, non-literate people embraced rituals meant to plunge individuals into the sacred time and space so that they could commune with their ancestors and, often times, the creators of the cosmos. As Durkheim (1995) argued, this feeling no doubt shaped an epistemology that saw a disjunction between the sacred and profane worlds, and a concerted effort to shield the latter from the former (Douglas 2002). Without a formalized collective of religious specialists, however, and writing to store extensive collective memory, the creation of complex, abstract systems of dogma and doctrine were beyond the scope and, to put it frankly, interests of most of these societies.

2.2 The age of empires

First in Mesopotamia, and then Egypt, China, and the Indus Valley, the world changed completely about five thousand years ago. The evolution of nascent city-states and, then, small-scale regional states gradually ushered in radical changes to the lived experience of a significant proportion of people. Consequently, a struggle over political autonomy between local and regional centers —one that had already emerged in chiefdoms for several millennia (Earle 1989)—mushroomed to levels previously unseen. In the following section, I briefly outline what political autonomy means and how it evolved while sketching out a theory of the state. After establishing this, I will examine how the pre-Axial state's efforts to usurp all things local also involved suppressing access to the experience of transcendence.

2.2.1 Political entrepreneurship

As groups get bigger, denser, and more heterogeneous, they face key logistical problems regarding the production and distribution of resources—both in terms of how to produce more and how to determine how much each person

gets—as well as regarding how to coordinate and control individuals and collectives (Johnson and Earle 2000). One solution is to segment into smaller units, with one unit migrating to a new resource niche. By about ten thousand years ago, the vast majority of habitable, arable land was occupied and, especially, alluvial planes like the Nile or Euphrates became prime real estate, because the annual floods replenished the soil (thus, reducing the need for seasonal migration) which, with innovative, intensive farming could feed the growing populations that result from sedentary living (Fagan 2004). Eventually, temple- and then palace-economies grew as mechanisms for resolving the logistical problems related to production, distribution, and regulation (Lipinski 1979). These, however, were not accidental phenomena, but reflected the efforts and interests (and successes) of a set of actors who may best be termed political entrepreneurs (Flannery 1972; Yoffee 2005). Political entrepreneurs are primarily concerned with technological, organizational, normative, and/or symbolic innovation that generates opportunities to monopolize access to power as a material resource (e.g., the right to use violence) and a symbolic resource (e.g., architecture meant to project superiority and evoke awe).

Consequently, where political entrepreneurs have some success, they are capable of reconfiguring the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space that demarcates the political sphere from all other spheres—that is, they are able to construct autonomous political institutions that, ultimately, can act upon other institutions such as kinship (Abrutyn 2013b). For instance, it became common practice in every nascent state to (1) build a city within a city, usually on a hill, in which the Palace and Temple was situated, surrounded by the royal family's courtiers, and then surrounded by a wall and the rest of the city; (2) declare some days or weeks state-sanctioned holidays; (3) invent specific sets of roles related to political matters such as *subject* or *citizen*; and (4) saturate the physical, temporal, and social with symbolic significance distinct and apart from the realm of kinship (e.g. through a distinct head god that paralleled the king). Phenomenologically, autonomy meant the institutionalization of means, goals, concerns, and behavioral patterns that were discretely governed by political criteria, expediency, and the logic of power (Eisenstadt 1963; Joyce 2000; Mann 1986). To be sure, it is important to note that autonomy—in whatever guise it takes—is (a) always partial and always processual and (b) often contested, and rarely stable for long periods of time. Therefore, when I say goals or means were discretely governed, it is always a matter of degree and not one of kind.

In short, then, the urban revolution begun five thousand years ago could also be characterized as the onset of political entrepreneurship and the gradual evolution of political autonomy. What is truly notable about this process, besides the fact that there are striking parallels across Egypt, China, Mesopotamia (Sand-

erson 1999)—and, presumably, Anatolia and the Indus Valley—is that the archaeological record allows us to see the challenges and successes, as well as failures, of political entrepreneurs over a long span of time (Chase-Dunn et al. 2008; Yoffee and Cowgill 1988). Indeed, three key factors stand out for our discussion. First, the rudimentary tension between center and periphery found in paramount chiefdoms was exacerbated as the seemingly eternal struggle between town and country was a constant fixture of these polities. Second, besides problems of production, distribution, and regulation, the larger a polity got in terms of population size, geographic space, and diversity, the greater the pressure was for new mechanisms integrating the disparate parts. Political ambitions rose and fell with the successes and failures of organizational, normative, and symbolic innovations. Third, in nearly every case, political entrepreneurs sought means to usurp local claims to authority regardless of the consequences these efforts might or did have.

2.2.2 The state

The state is a political organization that monopolizes the legitimate right to violence as a last resort (Weber 1978). Though it relies on ideological power, its principal concerns are centered on practical and pragmatic issues related to producing resources, maintaining distribution, defending against external threats, managing collective risk, making collectively-binding decisions, and so forth. The state, though there are some rare exceptions, is eminently rational, and political entrepreneurship is nearly always determined to "make the world legible" (Scott 1998)—that is, to standardize, formalize, concretize, quantify, and bureaucratize. For these same reasons, the state is always a site of contestation either within—as in the case of democracies and political parties—or without—as in the case of resistance, rebellions, and revolution.

Indeed, the use of power and its transformation into legitimate authority always threatens the interests of some groups of people, especially those physically and cognitively distant from the political center. The same issues urban centers have long had with the rural countryside—where custom reigns over law, personal relations over impersonal bureaucracy, and blurry, multiplex social interactions over clear, delineated routinized exchanges—continue to plague modern states in similar ways. Jurisdictional claims shape the trajectory of states, and thus the pressure for integrative mechanisms remains a constant.

An additional dimension of the state worth discussing is the recurring tension between traditional and legal-rational forms of authority, on the one hand, and that of charismatic leaders and groups, on the other (Weber 1978).

The former two tend to be highly stable, routinized forms of control rooted in either "the way things have always been" or in formalized, written documents that guide how power is wielded and its limitations. The latter, on the other hand, is grounded in the ultimate moral, cosmic, social order. Whereas obedience comes out of habit or through administrative design in the former two, it is duty and obligation to the personal characteristics of the leader, cadre of elites, or the system itself that generates submission where charisma is present. The three forms are not mutually exclusive, and very often political entrepreneurship draws from all three to successfully innovate and extend political autonomy. What is unique, however, about the pre-Axial states is the *theocratic* nature of all three forms of authority: hereditary kingship was grounded in divine right; legal norms were often legitimated by appeal to upholding the rightness of the secular and sacred worlds; and kings were divine, as either gods or incarnations of gods, using smoke and mirrors to obfuscate the material bases of their claims to power. Against this background, one of the foremost needs for political entrepreneurs was to monopolize the means not only of physical violence, but also of psychic violence—or control over symbolic power. Hence, political autonomy at this time meant usurping not only the legal and economic authority of local villages and towns, but also the religious authority too.

2.2.3 The end of transcendence

Because of the parallel evolution of political autonomy across cases, we can focus briefly on one case to highlight the way in which religion was usurped and the access to and experience of transcendence became highly regulated and, in many instances, suppressed. Though the first city-state emerged in what is now southern Iraq around the fourth millennium BCE, it would take nearly a thousand or more years for the temple-economy to shift towards a political economy (van de Mieroop 2004). The rise of political entrepreneurs in Mesopotamia came about when a confluence of contingencies intersected, and put pressure on the centralization and consolidation of power for the purposes of intensifying production, managing risk (e. g., centralized grain storage or the finance of long-distance trade), coordinating labor (e. g., public works such as irrigation), and resolving conflicts among non-kin groups (Nissen 1988; Yoffee 2005). Concomitantly, a landed class and royal family emerged that signaled an increasingly sharp stratification system and greater levels of inequality in power, prestige, and wealth (Fried 1967). The former exigencies created opportunities for political upstarts who could (a) attract loyal men to serve as a protomilitia and (b) mobilize individuals and collectives to solve complex problems

that had real or imagined benefits for a significant proportion of the population. The latter put pressure on mechanisms of integration meant to reduce tensions wrought by diversity and the need for impersonal processes of conflict resolution and the sudden decline in local independence as an elite came to monopolize force, power, and authority.

The solution was two-fold: the invention and expansion of a bureaucracy meant to generate administrative loyalty within the polity (Adams 1966) and the usurpation of the principal media of religious interaction, exchange, and communication (Abrutyn 2014): sacredness and piety. The first step in this process, from about 2800 – 2350 BCE, was the synthesis of various local city deities into a regional pantheon, which reflected both the king's interest in universal power and the need for local, priestly authority (Nissen 1988). This process led to an explosion of gods that matched both the complexity of occupational specialization and the pecking order of various city-states. Each god had a narrowly defined sphere of influence and a highly practical, concretized role; and each reflected *real* social relationships. The focus of Mesopotamian religion shifted from the older non-literate religions that were centered on solidarity to newer forms of religion that were centered on maintaining and reproducing order, legitimacy, and the parallels between the secular and sacred (Jacobsen 1963). This arrangement left the local religions virtually free to continue to practice transcendental rituals.

However, this arrangement changed with the successful conquest of southern Mesopotamia by Sargon the Great (ca. 2350 BCE) and subsequent expansion of the empire, by his grandson Naram-Sin, as far as transportation and communication technologies would suffice (Liverani 1993a). Naram-Sin faced two key problems. First, the further he expanded Akkadian rule, the more diverse the subjugated population and the more distant many population centers were from the political center. Second, local priestly rule, which was always in tension with the political center, became costly to suppress through coercive force. Hence, he deified himself, which meant all land that belonged to the gods (e. g., temple land) belonged to him and, in essence, became the property of the gods (Liverani 1993b). It also meant that access to the supernatural and the experience of transcendence were increasingly consolidated in his hands. This point is not to say that local religion was wiped out, but states worked hard to incorporate more and more of the population into the center. As such, rituals designed to legitimate the ruling elite regulated when, who, how, how much, and where transcendence occurred. But, this transcendence was grounded or made immanent by the state. The new year's ritual in which the king provided wine and food to the people, rules were relaxed, and a carnival-like atmosphere reigned were not designed to access the sacred space or commune with the

gods, but rather were mechanisms of control. The more mundane, daily access to the sacred, such as through the temples, their rituals, and their mysteries, became highly guarded and opaque to the public (van de Mieroop 2004). It is, then, one of the key reasons for axial religion's success in surviving millennia that access to the sacred and transcendent supernatural became central to the beliefs and rituals developed and articulated to diverse social strata. Meanwhile, religious elites became highly dependent upon the royal family and aristocracy for their training and patronage: "the very nature of literacy in Mesopotamia [...] was so complex and cumbersome a skill that it could be mastered *only by an elite*, and the expense involved in this was so considerable that it could *only be borne by the ruling groups*. The scribes, therefore, *far from establishing an independent cultural and political base, simply continued to serve the ruling group*" (Machinist 1986: 202; emphasis added). That is, priests, who were borne of the scribal class, were nothing more than glorified occupational specialists within the king's court or serving in the landed gentry's home (Oppenheim 1975). This position is a far cry from what would happen in the Axial Age across cases. And temples, located immediately next to the palace, were simply grain storage sites that the king used to distribute rations for corveé labor and as architectural symbols of his power and authority (Richards and Van Buren 2000).

2.3 Axiality

The Axial Age, as the case has been built throughout my argument, was a period in which religio-cultural entrepreneurs began, in earnest, to monopolize authority over certain sets of concerns vis-à-vis the polity and kinship systems. These concerns, though not always religious in a Western theological sense, tended to revolve around the ultimate grounds of life: ethical and moral guidelines for living, cosmological and soteriological visions, and a notion of the supernatural as distinctly different from and beyond the secular political order. Compared to the position of the religio-cultural intellectual of Mesopotamia, pre-Han China, or Egypt, their Axial counterparts were notably different. Most emerged at the margins of the center, either by accident or by choice; they envisioned themselves as "prophets" in the Weberian (1963 [1922]) sense in that they found their authority in a sense of a mission or special position (Humphreys 1975; Rowley 1956); and, most were critical of the polity and put forth an alternative vision of the "good" society whether it be ecumenical (Voegelin 1956 – 74), rational (Roetz 1993), or guided by law (Liverani 2005). In the following section, I examine first the underlying causes for the Axial Age. That is, parallel to my brief discussion of political autonomy, it is necessary to consider what allowed religio-

cultural entrepreneurs to emerge and, ultimately, elucidate the logic of transcendentalism as a movement strategy designed to draw from a growing pool of recruits, maintain and expand resource bases, and reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic universe.

2.3.1 A new world

The first millennium was a period of massive growth, as the Bronze Age world collapsed and the Iron Age ushered in (relatively) rapid changes that set the course for religio-cultural entrepreneurship. First, new transportation, communication, and warfare technologies facilitated imperial ambitions in ways previously unimaginable (Mann 1986). The reaches of empire, and its ability to hold a larger population in a larger territory were amplified, while new symbolic and normative techniques were employed to integrate these bigger political worlds. On the one hand, iron technology allowed for more efficient and brutal warfare, while on the other hand, these same weapons led to both larger swaths of peaceful territories and safer routes of travel. Both of these factors had important consequences for the emergence of a religio-cultural entrepreneurial class. In particular, the coercive integrative techniques the Assyrians and Han used throughout their empires shrunk the world by imposing some degree of cultural hegemony that accelerated cultural exchange, brought diversity to the entire empire, and generated pressures for a cosmopolitan vision. Likewise, the newfound ability to travel contributed to intellectuals like Confucius or the Buddha going from town to town, encountering increasingly diverse populations, and, thereby, conditioning far more universalistic messages than previously imagined. Thus, for practical movement purposes, an ecumenicalism that had no place among Mesopotamian religious elites became necessary.

Second, with larger, more peaceful territories came stability, rapid urbanization, and the growth of new ascendant social classes. The population in cities mushroomed (Taagepera 1978; 1979) at the same time that an economic boom created greater disposable wealth to support a religio-entrepreneurial class and intensely salient inequality (Bauman et al. 2014). These demographic-economic factors had several consequences. As noted previously, a large pool of potential recruits was found in cities, which in turn compelled religio-cultural entrepreneurs to travel and develop universal visions of the world. Unlike their Mesopotamian or Egyptian counterparts who were dependent for their lifestyles on a small class of wealthy denizens, a growing merchant middle class and landed gentry increasingly inclined to live in urban areas brought new bases of support and independence. It has been noted, for instance, that “the people” that

the Hebrew Bible refers to are *the ascendant* middle class (Blenkinsopp 1995) who would have found their interests appealed to directly by prophets and a certain set of priests (Abrutyn 2015b). Finally, the highly visible and sharp inequality that religio-cultural entrepreneurs would have encountered in each town and city they visited, would present them with an easy moral justification for the new frame they articulated to the people. Rising inequities and the apparent misery could be blamed on the landed and political classes. This strategy would have been perfectly adapted to the growing middle class who, like most ascendant classes, are restricted from integrating into the older established wealthy, as well as a significant body of poor, dispossessed peoples who would see these messages of social justice as a weapon against the powerful.

Third, besides the visible aggrandizement the royal class displayed, the wanton aggression and violence would have further reinforced the religio-cultural entrepreneurs' distrust of political entrepreneurs, firmed up their conviction that they should be independent of political decisions and goals and even have some say over how political decisions were made, and further served as justification for their movements (Armstrong 2006). The Neo-Assyrians, for example, were known to randomly flay the inhabitants of a city and adorn the outside walls with their skins as a threat and reminder to any oppositional parties (Bleibtreu 1991). When they didn't annihilate the conquered, they would send pockets of the population throughout the rest of the empire, haul the topsoil to the capital, raze buildings, and attempt to literally erase the cultural memory of the conquered (Jonker 1995). And, though the narratives in the Chinese and Indian cases are slightly different, the horrors were undoubtedly no less salient. When the Zhou dynasty's feudal system began to unravel in the first millennium BCE, the so-called Warring States period gripped the region, leading to power struggles between and within various local states and claiming the lives of myriad innocents. Against this backdrop, Confucius as well as the so-called 100 schools emerged. By the mid-fifth century BCE, the Warring States era accelerated both the efforts to centralize power and the structural opportunities for an ambitious Confucian class to draw boundaries around its physical, temporal, social, and symbolic reality and that of the Emperor's. In India, too, the polity played a similar role: in the late Vedic period, the Kuru Kingdom sought to establish hegemonic rule; by the sixth century BCE, sixteen bigger rival kingdoms emerged, struggling with each other at just about the time that Darius I invaded, bringing new cultural elements and new threats from a very different polity. It is under these conditions, then, that new religious or cultural movements could flourish.

2.3.2 Religio-cultural entrepreneurs strike

All social movements, regardless of time or space, require articulating a clear frame that justifies why their new organizational, symbolic, and/or normative solutions to real or imagined problems is better than extant frames (Benford and Snow 2000). These frames are often more effective at drawing human and material resources to the movement when they tap into morally and affectively-laden grievances and visions of the social world (Jasper 1997), and in moments of real or perceived crises (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015; Jasper and Poulsen 1995). Eisenstadt (1982; 1986a) was perhaps the first to identify the Axial Age as a moment of religious (and cultural) entrepreneurship, but in the idealist German tradition he drew from, he overemphasized the supposed symbolic crisis that emerged from a perceived disjunction between the supramundane and the mundane worlds. That is, he never took seriously the political motives or logic behind entrepreneurs conceptualizing a transcendent religious sphere, nor the fundamental conditions that would have supported such a "radical" vision of social reality.[4]

In terms of the former, we can draw three key conditions from the previous section. First, populations had reached thresholds in size, density, and heterogeneity required for a new type of entrepreneur. Size seems obviously a condition: greater numbers of people mean that there are greater potential sources of human, material, and symbolic resources, as well as a more complex division of labor and greater diversity; and that the economic base of the society has expanded and can support more activities. Density is a central force that accelerates, intensifies, and increases the frequency of social exchanges; consequently, innovation, the spread of information, and new social networks are capable of forming. Heterogeneity is key also, as diversity produces conflict, which leads both to pressures for finding mechanisms to release tension as well as to creativity. Second, while polities were able to grow larger than ever before (Assyria, for instance, was the largest empire on Earth until Rome [Taagepera 1978]), and create greater levels of peace as bandits and barbarians were eliminated, the same problems faced by old and new empires remained salient: the margins

4 While this discussion is purposefully general in its theoretical and historical analysis, it is imperative to note two key caveats. First, the level of religious autonomy achieved in each case varied tremendously because of local cultural, historical, political, and economic contingencies. Second, and relatedly, the relationship between religious and political elites over the course of centuries (and in the case of China, millennia) was powerfully shaped by these early outcomes of entrepreneurship. What matters, then, is that entrepreneurship looked very similar in the ultimate goals of the movements and their strategies, if not in their successes and failures.

of empires always are the hardest to restrain and integrate, because they are the furthest from the center. To be sure, in the case of China and, especially India, the center was not always a physical site like it was in the Israelite case. Nonetheless, the cognitive and symbolic center of society was challenged by the various Indian ascetics as they rejected the village-based social structure in favor of wandering, forest-living, and eventually, monasticism. Finally, the apparent economic boom brought on first by the intensification of farming and warfare through iron technologies and then the expansion of trade created a growing pool of potential movement recruits and, subsequently, a new base of resource independence for religio-cultural entrepreneurs. In essence, the conditions were ripe for movements in these four regions; what was missing was a compelling movement frame to justify their claims and to draw support from outside of the palace.

That justification, given these conditions, was easy to construct. Religio-cultural entrepreneurs could envision their role as distinct from the political elite. Because the supernatural world often reflects the material world and how it is organized, it is not a far leap to see the logic in conceptualizing the supernatural, whether personal or impersonal, as over, above, and beyond the mundane. Concomitantly, only those steeped in the proper traditions and training could bring people into contact and communication with this transcendental reality. The strength of this logic rested on several important facts. First, the political elite, off and on for several millennia, had restricted and, even, suppressed access to and the experience of transcendence. Religio-cultural entrepreneurs, through various types of innovations like the advent of the pilgrimage, offered to return the right to experience transcendental reality to a larger proportion of people—especially those who could afford to make pilgrimage or sacrifices at the various temples. Indeed, in many cases, the sites to which pilgrims traveled were geographically removed from political centers (Turner 1973). And, eventually, many of these religions would institutionalize a symbolic pilgrimage (e. g., the Passover ritual [Smith 1997]) or a more mundane visit to a monastery for various religious needs (Walsh 2009).

Second, religio-cultural entrepreneurs, dealing with a cosmopolitan, diverse, larger-than-previously imagined universe, began the process of simplifying certain key aspects of belongingness. This made sense in that (a) if their vision of the sacred was transcendent, then all peoples were subject to this power; (b) if all peoples were subject, then a universal frame was necessary for a universal moral community that transcended physical, temporal, social, and symbolic boundaries; and (c) the simpler the criteria of membership, the greater the share of potential members. Thus, despite the complexity of the Jewish religion and its numerous laws and rituals, membership was rooted in (a) being born to a Jewish

mother, (b) being circumcised in a ritualistic manner, and (c) learning to read Torah so one could carry the laws, physically and spiritually, wherever they went. The simplicity of this formula is one reason Judaism has survived despite intentional efforts to eradicate it (Abrutyn 2015a). Likewise, Buddha invented an eight-fold path meant to reduce the costs of adherence. Indeed, later entrepreneurs like Paul, who removed the principal barriers to Hellenization—circumcision and *Kashrut*—further simplified these membership "costs."

Third, the frame was easily justified on moral grounds, in that regardless of the polity, they were all terribly exploitative, violent, suppressive, and rooted in practical, amoral concerns. The fact that inequality was perhaps as sharp and salient during the first millennium as at any other time previously further added fuel to the prophets and ascetics (Nolan and Lenski 2010). The middle and upper-middle classes could be appealed to by the low cost of belonging and the promise of relative equality for all adherents, while the lower classes could be appealed to through social justice. To be sure, in some cases, the elite could also be drawn in to these movements, especially at the local level. Hezekiah and, later, his grandson Josiah were pulled into the visions of Yahwist entrepreneurs (Abrutyn 2015b), local governors as well as the Emperor of China were caught in the Confucian web, local kings gave in to the Brahmin class, while the Buddha found plenty of wealthy patrons (and Ashoka would even try to craft a theoretical Buddhist empire).

3 Final thoughts

The Axial Age was a period of parallel evolution in that several regions were facing similar demographic, economic, technological, and political conditions that created structural opportunities for a new type of entrepreneur: religio-cultural intelligentsia. In a universe delimited by the monopoly over force that their political counterparts possessed, religio-cultural entrepreneurs worked within the cultural and ideal realm, attempting to draw new recruits and pools of material and symbolic resources to leverage some degree of independence from the political and kinship networks. Rather than power, their medium of exchange, interaction, and communication was the supernatural, and their currency was morality and piety. And while their goals were subordination of the polity to religious and cultural criteria, the actual trajectory of each movement was shaped by local historical, economic, and political conditions that contributed to the Chinese case being tightly tied to the state and the Jewish case being far more autonomous from both the regional state and, upon return from exile, the local polity. In every case, however, entrepreneurs envisioned a religio-cultural

sphere that was discrete from the village kin systems and the centralized political empires. Physically, it sought to create new centers devoted to the activities related to the supramundane, and relatively independent from the polity. Temporally, it sought to differentiate its holidays and religious activities vis-à-vis other activities, elevating recurring days like the Sabbath or special pilgrimage times. Socially, entrepreneurs envisioned a moral community that knew no political boundaries or ascriptive anchors; "all" people were a part of the community—even if "all" meant all known people and only those who were considered "people" in the first millennium BCE. And, symbolically, entrepreneurs sought to create cognitive and cultural boundaries around the sites, activities, roles, organizations, and so forth that delineated where religio-cultural spheres began and ended; like the polity before it, this meant saturating physical, social, and ideational objects with newly minted meanings, which, in turn, could act as external representations of the movement and its goals, and its vision of the universe.

The effort to create religious and cultural autonomy surely contributed to the elevation of a transcendent vision as much as, if not more so than, the suppression of transcendence created opportunities to more freely commune with the holy. As the physical and cognitive world began to change, it became easier to identify and justify the distance between the secular and supramundane, not only as an intellectual exercise in pointing to their disjunction, but also in the geography of the sacred that altered the habits and routines of everyday life for more and more people. Eventually, over a few generations, it becomes taken for granted that the supernatural forces dwell in worlds above, beyond, and apart. Thus, it was not so much the case that transcendence was invented as that it was shaped to suit the conditions within which nascent entrepreneurs emerged, and the purposes and goals of these movements. While, admittedly, the idea of an omniscient, omnipresent transcendent deity like Yahweh was a rather new idea, biblical scholars remain skeptical of when monotheism, in the conventional contemporary sense of the word, emerged. It is likely that some entrepreneurs in Babylonian exile began to envision a monolatrous universe—that is, a single god above all other gods—but the idea of an exclusive god was not likely realized for several more centuries among the elite, and maybe even another millennium for the masses. For most humans, transcendence was experienced in rituals that bracketed the daily rounds and which brought people into close contact with each other. Political elites, though unable to fully constrain local rituals, imposed national religions on the people in ways that usurped access to the supernatural and the various gifts offered. Religio-cultural entrepreneurs sought to return this access to the people, albeit in a manner they could monopolize. Thus, transcendence was "rediscovered," so-to-speak, during the Axial Age. And, a conception of a world above and beyond the mundane was easily grafted onto

the success entrepreneurs had in creating distinct physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space for religio-cultural activities.

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