CHAPTER 17

CONCLUSION | Was There Ever an Axial Age?

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Introduction

The idea that a great moral and intellectual revolution occurred in a few regions of Eurasia during the last millennium BCE—well after the rise of complex societies—is not new. It dates back at least as far as the scholarship of the French Indologist Anquetil-Duperron (1771) and the Scottish folklorist Stuart-Glennie (1873). However, it was Jaspers in mid-twentieth-century Switzerland who first coined the term "Axial Age" (*die Achsenzeit*, in his native German) to characterize, among other developments, the rise of moralizing religions and more egalitarian principles of governance, which in turn spawned many hallmark features of modernity. Jaspers (1948, 1953) along with several later Axial Age proponents (e.g. Bellah 2011; Eisenstadt 1986b) argue that this "axial turn" constituted a radical departure from the coercive political systems typical of so-called "archaic" states headed by deified rulers, in which extreme forms of inequality such as slavery and human sacrifice were sanctioned. According to this theory, axial modes of thought first appeared in what is now China, India, Israel-Palestine, Iran, and Greece, finding expression in the ethical systems respectively known as Confucianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Greek philosophy (the five "axial religions"). These traditions emerged over a relatively short time span, roughly 800–200 BCE. But does it really make sense to describe this period as an "Axial Age"?

In this concluding chapter, drawing on the evidence of the volume as a whole, we argue that the idea of a single "age" is misleading, but also that some traditional notions of "axiality," specifically the shift from coercive to more ethical forms of governance, is indeed a discernible phenomenon in global history. At the root of this process, though, was not the emergence of novel ways of looking at the world, transcending inherited traditions and focussing instead on universal, moralizing principles (Bellah 2011; Eisenstadt 2011; Jaspers 1953)—which in any case would require further explanation in turn—but the demands of increasingly complex societies. In our view, axiality is a consequence of passing a certain threshold in the scale and structure of human societies, one that has been reached at different points in time in different parts of the world. Our central proposal is that once this threshold is passed, societies must adopt more prosocial and egalitarian moral principles if they are to survive the twin specters of external conquest and internal collapse (Turchin 2016).

Recognizing that ethical concerns can change over time—for instance that authoritarian regimes using the threat of violence to control subject populations can give way to ones that emphasize consensus-building and reciprocal rights and obligations—is not an endorsement of unconstrained moral relativism. In fact, what is judged morally good is somewhat invariable across human societies, apparently stemming from psychological predispositions that emerged deep in our species' evolutionary history. The evidence for a universal human morality is compelling. For example, in a recent analysis of ethnographic writings on 60 societies worldwide, researchers found that seven cooperative rules (help your family, help your group, return favors, be brave, defer to superiors, divide resources fairly, and respect others' property) were morally prescribed in all the cultural groups surveyed and, crucially, none of these was ever deemed morally bad (Curry et al. 2019). The fact that these seven rules for cooperation are predicted by game theory and found throughout the natural world (Curry 2016) may explain why those solutions are also considered morally good in all human societies. That is, moral intuitions appear to be biologically and culturally evolved adaptations to various collective action problems. But whereas in small-scale societies, innate moral predispositions might be sufficient to sustain many forms of cooperation, they became less effective in larger-scale and more complex societies where problems of surveillance and enforcement were increasingly acute and new forms of political domination and economic exploitation created unprecedented forms of suffering and social injustice (Mullins et al. 2013; Norenzayan et al. 2016).

In the next section, we consider how this set of panhuman moral intuitions, which evolved in the context of small group living, was insufficient to ensure cooperation at larger scales. As societies first reached new thresholds of complexity, many of our innate moral sensibilities were distorted or overridden as a result of the exercise of extreme forms of top-down coercion and violence. However, beyond a certain threshold of social complexity, such despotism generally proved to be unsustainable. This is the point at which the core features of "axiality" emerged, empowering equitable moral norms similar to those prevalent in earlier, smaller-scale societies via novel mechanisms of doctrinal religious organization and ideological teaching and proselytizing.

Changing moral landscapes in world history

Ancient foraging societies faced many kinds of problems related to collective action, ranging from the coordination of subsistence activities, to the defending of one's band against raiding parties and animal predators, to the resolution of internal conflict and the management of bullies (Boehm 2012). However, many of these problems could be quite effectively managed using a suite of evolved psychological adaptations encouraging prosocial behavior, reputation management, third-party punishment,

and so on. Relevant adaptations include shame (Fessler 2004), empathy (Decety 2010), kin psychology (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014), coalitional psychology (Billig and Tajfel 1973; Gavrilets 2015), and a host of other mechanisms that regulate adherence to norms and the sanctioning of transgressions (Richerson and Henrich 2012; Kelly and Davis 2018; Wilson et al. 2013). In other words, humans naturally tend to be conditional cooperators (Fehr and Fischbacher 2004) with a strong aversion to fairness violations (Haidt 2012; Haidt and Joseph 2008) and an appetite for "prosocial punishment" (Fehr and Gächter 2002). In simple societies, these tools for prosocial living are easily deployed and regularly sharpened and maintained through such cultural practices as collective ritual and social synchrony (Wiltermuth and Heath 2009), commensality and music (Morley 2013), and potent forms of group bonding based on shared traumatic ordeals (Whitehouse 1996, 2018). Indeed, the chapter surveying "late complexity" societies in this volume highlights the way many of these tools have been used by cultures from Papua New Guinea, northern South Asia, Borneo, the Amazon Basin, Siberia, and the Finger Lakes region of North America.

With the rise of farming and increasingly large-scale human settlements, however, the evolved moral toolkit designed to enable cooperation in small groups was placed under increasing stress. Dependence on social interactions between strangers became more and more commonplace, weakening social cohesion in society at large and making it harder to detect and punish cheaters, defectors, and free riders. Human societies evolved several adaptations to break through the limit to group size imposed by face-to-face interactions. One adaptation was the capacity to signal group membership with symbolic markers (Richerson and Boyd 1998; Turchin 2011). Markers such as dialect and language, clothing, ornamentation, and religion allowed humans to determine whether someone personally unknown to them was a member of their cooperating group. Another evolutionary innovation was hierarchical social organization—"chains of command" (Turchin and Gavrilets 2009). There is no limit to the overall group size that can be unified and organized by a hierarchical network, as long as the sufficient number of organizational levels is added, which is why armies and bureaucracies in scores of different cultural contexts tend to be organized in such a way. A third adaptation, which worked together with identity markers and hierarchies, was to establish routinized forms of ritual practice associated with a more "doctrinal mode of religiosity" (Whitehouse 1995, 2000, 2004). This was a cultural adaption for large-group living that allowed identity markers to become standardized across expanding regions and time spans through high-frequency (i.e. daily or weekly) collective rituals and public oratory. Not only did this allow social cohesion to be maintained in much larger populations, based on shared beliefs and practices associated with a spreadable religious tradition, it also provided a system of policing via orthodoxy checks imposed by a priestly hierarchy (Whitehouse 2004). The emergence of the doctrinal mode has been linked to the earliest phases in the

rise of social complexity (Whitehouse and Hodder 2010; Whitehouse et al. 2013; Gantley et al. 2018; Whitehouse et al. 2019).

The dark side to more hierarchical forms of social organization, however, was the establishment of increasingly oppressive systems of governance, commonly referred to as archaic states (Bellah 2011; Flannery and Marcus 2012; Trigger 2003; Turchin 2016). In his survey of seven early civilizations, Trigger (2003) found that all of them practiced slavery, were ruled by divine kings, and engaged in human sacrifice. Data systematically collected in the Seshat Databank confirms this pattern for a much larger sample of past societies. In particular, the incidence of human sacrifice increases from very low levels (<10 percent of cases in the sample) for small-scale societies to very high levels—over 80 percent—for mid-scale societies (complex chiefdoms and archaic states), and then declines to low levels for very large-scale societies (Turchin et al. 2019). The chapters in this volume attest to these practices as well. Both slavery and god-kings (or, at least, rulers claiming some close affinity with divine agents) are found in nearly all parts of the world surveyed here. While we have chosen not to focus on human sacrifice in this particular volume, clear examples of it are mentioned in the Late Complexity Survey and the chapters on Highland Peru and the Inland Niger Delta.

History shows that top-down coercion is effective up to a point. In small and even medium-sized states with highly cohesive elites, for example, the general population can be kept in check by fear of imprisonment, torture, or worse. But the larger the state, the more likely it is that factions will form and gather the collective strength to mount coups and revolutions. These problems become more acute as societies grow in complexity and scale, becoming more internally diverse, for example through the absorption of multiple ethnicities and religious traditions. As a result, early "mega-empires" were regularly wracked by palace coups and ruler assassinations, elite infighting, and regional rebellions. This constitutes a turning point in the evolution of social complexity, one that takes us back to our moral intuitions at the same moment that it thrusts us forward into novel forms of ideology and organized religion.

Axiality adds a new layer of moral norms

The idea that axiality constitutes a new dimension of equity-promoting, morality-enforcing normative practices via new forms of ideology and religion requires some careful unpacking. First, we need to be clear what exactly we mean by "axiality" and how its core features relate to our species-specific moral intuitions. Recent

efforts to identify a set of specific diagnostic features for the Axial Age have focused on 12 principles[1] (Mullins et al. 2018):

1. **Moralistic punishment**: violations of natural morality will be punished by higher authorities, whether by means of secular or supernatural sanctions in this life or the next.
2. **Moralizing norms**: peers and other members of a relational network are obliged to monitor and deter deviance within the community.
3. **Promotion of prosociality**: cooperative behavior should be actively encouraged and rewarded.
4. **Moralizing omniscient supernatural beings**: an "eye in the sky" watching over everyone, punishing sins and rewarding virtuous behavior.
5. **Rulers are not gods**: worldly leaders are merely human, just like everyone else.
6. **Equating elites and commoners**: moral rules apply to both elites and commoners, regardless of birth and social status.
7. **Equating rulers and commoners**: moral rules apply to both rulers and commoners, regardless of birth and social status.
8. **Formal legal code**: the rule of law is explicitly formulated.
9. **General applicability of law**: the law applies to all citizens equally.
10. **Constraints on the executive**: the executive's decisions are constrained by formal rules—such as a veto—or informal (but powerful) ideological constraints, e.g. requiring the tacit approval of a priesthood.
11. **Bureaucratization**: administration of a system of governance requires specialist skills, training, and salary.
12. **Impeachment**: excessive and arbitrary exercise of power by rulers can lead to their removal.

Analysis of the emergence of these 12 principles across a sample of 13 world regions (the Mediterranean Basin, Egypt, the Inland Niger Delta, the Levant, Anatolia, the south-western Iranian Plateau, South Asia, North China, the Lower Mekong Basin, Japan, the Hawaiian Islands, the Mississippi Valley, and Highland Peru) plus a survey of Late Complexity areas prior to the spread of modernity shows that a coherent turn towards axiality (using all of the above principles) did not occur everywhere, and in the regions where it did emerge, the patterns and rates of emergence differ. For example, in what is today Japan, Cambodia, China, and Greece, only some and not all of the 12 principles coalesced. In the Lower Mekong Basin in modern-day Cambodia, specifically, there is stronger evidence for an axial transformation following our

1 This list, though, does not cover all arguments made by proponents of the Axial Age idea. See Mullins et al. (2018) for in-depth discussion of the range of arguments made by previous scholars on this popular topic.

definition in the early second millennium CE rather than in the period between 800 and 200 BCE. Furthermore, this axial transformation is not closely linked with one of the axial ideologies; Hindu beliefs and practices had reached the region several centuries before and only long after the traditional end date of the Axial Age did a Southeast Asian form of Buddhist thought bring clear moralizing and egalitarian principles to the region (Harris 2005; Higham 2014; Miksic 2007; Vickery 1986). Even then, these served to prop up powerful, arguably "archaic"-style rulers rather than subverting their authority (see the Lower Mekong Basin chapter for details). Moreover, although the pattern across all the regions sampled was a progression from relatively few to relatively many principles of axiality being attested, the path was not necessarily a linear one, with losses as well as gains along the way. In the Italian Peninsula, for example, the introduction of Christianity certainly resulted in a more pronounced moralizing dimension compared to older local religions, but, at the same time, it was paralleled by the flourishing of supposedly pre-axial traits such as an increase in social inequality and the emergence of autocracy legitimated on religious grounds (a process outlined in the Mediterranean Basin chapter).

Another key feature of Jaspers' Axial Age—one followed by many commentators since—is his argument that these novel ideologies emerged autochthonously, quite independently of the others. Indeed, much of Jasper's argument can be traced to his initial observation that "the spiritual foundation of mankind arose in three *mutually independent* places, in the West—polarized in Orient and Occident—in India, and in China" (Jaspers 1953: 23, italics added), places that had experienced only "isolated and interrupted contacts ... [until] only a few centuries ago and properly speaking not until our own day" (10–11).[2] One need only look at the chapters in this volume on Anatolia, the Levant, Egypt, the Mediterranean Basin, and Iran to see how extensively archaeological and historical research, in the decades since Jaspers was writing, has unearthed evidence for sustained, impactful connections between all of these regions. Axial faiths such as Zoroastrianism, Rabbinic Judaism, and Greek philosophy not only developed through the exchange of ideas, but also owed much to earlier Hittite, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian ideals and practices.

Equally important for any assessment of the Axial Age hypothesis as traditionally formulated is the observation that the greatest concentration of the 12 principles was not in the first millennium BCE, but in the 2,000 years that followed. According to Eisenstadt (1996), for example, Japan can be seen as an extreme case in point. Due to the emperors' strong association with the divine and what he saw as a lack of tension between the political order and the realm of the sacred, Eisenstadt viewed Japan as pre-axial until the modern era—this despite the much earlier introduction and adoption of Buddhist and Confucian ideas. As the Japan chapter in this volume clearly articulates, the intermixing of faiths and political forms in this archipelago belies the idea of any clearly delineated "age" marking a transition between distinct eras. The long and complex dynamics discussed in the chapters on Iran, Anatolia, and Egypt underscore this point as well. Moreover, many of the 12 principles emerged much earlier than the Jaspers' model allows and in regions that were not part of the classical articulation of axiality. In Egypt, for instance, we see that an ideology emphasizing both personal piety (intimate relationships with the gods) and a moral imperative that everyone (from the humblest farmers to the living-gods who ruled as pharaohs) should live a "virtuous, just, and ordered life" emerged well before 800 BCE (see Egypt chapter). The Hittite civilization of Bronze Age Anatolia likewise witnessed the somewhat precocious development of a principle often ascribed to axial societies, namely the formalized and universally applied (though not exactly egalitarian) rule of law (see Anatolia chapter). There are also cases like the first-millennium CE Inland Niger Delta in what is today Mali, where we see evidence for societies organized "heterarchically" in an attempt to keep equitable, cooperative structures in place even in the face of increased social complexity, defying traditional models of "archaic" rule. Indeed, here and elsewhere (e.g. the Lower Mekong Basin), the arrival of supposedly axial or post-axial faiths like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam actually led to an increase in the number of *archaic* traits expressed, rather than the reverse.

Lastly, this volume seeks to incorporate the histories of areas that have been often neglected, in order to challenge the implication of many Axial Age narratives that areas outside of the five key regions only experienced axial transitions out of exposure to, or through the adoption of, "post-axial" social and religious forms. Close scrutiny of societies typically left out of discussions of axiality or modernity serves only to complicate the picture further. The chapter on the Hawaiian Islands, for instance, notes that no formal legal code, institutionalized constraints on rulers, or bureaucratic administration developed in the archipelago before European contact, but also that many hallmarks of axiality—including strong moralizing norms with clear enforcement mechanisms and inducements to act prosocially—were present alongside these nominally "archaic" traits. In the Central Andes, conversely, there are no obvious signs of anything like an axial transition, as most of the hallmarks of axiality remained absent even as the Incas expanded into a very large, complex empire. Interestingly, the arrival of the Christian Spanish in the area did not produce an axial revolution either, but in many ways resulted in even more oppressive rule and the disintegration of local communities, a far cry from the "universal moral ideals" expected of a post-axial society. A similar story can be told regarding the encounters with supposedly "axial" societies during periods of colonial rule experienced by many regions covered in the Late Complexity Survey chapter.

2 See Mullins et al. (2018) for further discussion.

Thus, axiality is a more complex, patchy, widely distributed, and temporally extensive phenomenon than the original advocates of the concept appreciated. Nevertheless, axiality involved an expansion of moral rules and novel enforcement mechanisms that had been systematically distorted in the archaic states that came before the axial transition(s). The prevalence of divine kings declined, and those that remained (as in Southeast Asia and throughout the states of the eastern Mediterranean and West Asia during the early first millennium CE) were increasingly constrained by formal and informal limits. Moreover, while their equity-promoting aspects were certainly limited in practice (see below), ideologies across the geographic sample surveyed here became more vocal about the universal applicability of salvation and made at least nods towards egalitarianism; and, throughout the globe, rules and procedures became increasingly formalized, administration came to be regulated, and prosocial activity continued to be performed. In short, while we cannot find support for a discrete "age," there are numerous moments of "axiality" that are identifiable in the global historical record.

If we abandon the idea that a particular period led to the flowering of these traits in a handful of regions, how then can we explain the observed patterns? According to the logic of game theory, the function of dominance-submission displays is to obviate fighting over resources to a point at which everyone loses (e.g. the resource is destroyed or both antagonists incur unnecessary fitness costs). In small-scale societies, ritual bonding, strong kin networks, ease of surveillance, and graduated sanctions (ranging from shaming and gossip to collective execution and ostracism) served to foster the requisite levels of cooperation within groups. As noted, these mechanisms become strained as societies become larger and more hierarchical, and power becomes concentrated in self-reproducing elites, a pattern we see throughout the historical record (Turchin et al. 2018; for an important possible alternative trajectory, though, see the Inland Niger Delta chapter). Nevertheless, excessive concentration of arbitrary power in the hands of god-kings—as was prevalent in many of these growing societies, whether they are termed archaic or something else—meant that the benefits for lower ranking sectors of society were disproportionately meager and the brutality of dominant individuals excessive. These tendencies ran contrary to natural moral preferences for more egalitarian principles of governance and resource distribution. Hittite legal practices during the Bronze Age, for instance, though formalized and regularized to a significant extent, lacked substantive constraints on the power of the ruler, who acted as chief military, judicial, political, and religious officer; indeed, simply challenging his judgment was punishable by death (see the Anatolia chapter). Similarly, in a number of cases, the principle of sharing privileges fairly was blatantly flouted by elites, who hoarded wealth while large portions of the population were enslaved or impoverished. For example, the rulers of the Western Zhou kingdom of northern China, who took up the mantle of preserving the "Mandate of Heaven"

(that is, they legitimated their authority by presenting themselves as chosen by the gods to preserve the good fortune and prosperity of their kingdom), ruled autocratically, maintaining strict social and economic hierarchies and offering no obvious indications of supporting egalitarian or cooperative institutions.

As the chapters in this volume illustrate time and again, it is difficult to maintain social cohesion at the scales and levels of complexity reached by these "archaic" states while supporting starkly inequitable distributions of land, wealth, and power. The 12 principles of axiality seem, then, to have restored some of this cooperation, or at least to have mollified the harsher edges of archaic rule, by postulating supernatural agents who cared about social justice, family values, the rule of law, and by constraining the powers of earthly rulers. Throughout the imperial period in China, for instance, rulers maintained almost unconstrained authority, often claiming the same Mandate of Heaven that had legitimated the Bronze Age rulers of the Western Zhou kingdom. In practice, though, the moralizing (and occasionally egalitarian) ideals of Confucian, Legalist, Mohist, and later Buddhist thought led to significant changes for the majority of the populace: the promotion, at least at times, of a policy of land distribution known as the equal-field system, the opening of political power to a wider segment of the population through meritocratic reforms, the state sponsorship of healthcare, pensions, and other social welfare programs, among other beneficial policies. The North China chapter, along with many other chapters in this volume, clearly illustrates this point.

Although the exact manner in which moral rules were upheld by axial ideologies varied across world regions, the tendency towards the stepwise constraining of harsh, autocratic rule, along with increasing support for these values, is unmistakable when viewed comparatively on a global scale and over several millennia. This is what we mean (or *should* mean) by "axiality." Two questions remain, however: what exactly drove this added layer of moral norms and enforcement, and why did it take the religious and ideological forms that it did? We will consider both questions in a further section. First, it is necessary to name the limits in practice, or blind spots, of these supposedly moralizing, universalizing trends.

The limits of axiality

Another clear pattern that shows up repeatedly in the preceding pages is that these axial ideologies, no matter how forceful they may have been in asserting the moral necessity of inclusivity and equality or universal access to salvation, were difficult to put into practice. Indeed, a common theme of the regional chapters here is that the treatment of women almost universally lagged behind that of other potentially disadvantaged groups. Even societies that embraced Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam—undoubtedly strongly moralizing and universalizing faiths—continued to tolerate disparities in the rights and privileges of different classes, denying positions of

authority or wealth to women, and widely accepting (often justifying) the practice of slavery.

The chapter on the Mediterranean Basin demonstrates how, once Christianity had been fully embraced as the official religion of the later Roman and Byzantine Empires, commentators preached the ability of all—rich and poor, man and woman—to attain salvation. Yet at the same time they also quoted Bible verses to argue for the inherent inferiority of women and slaves, justifying their low (and immutable) positions in the social hierarchy. States that adopted Islam supported similar contradictions, although, as the Egypt chapter highlights, women were sometimes offered more privileges than counterparts elsewhere. Nevertheless, non-Muslim populations in the early medieval caliphates were subject to special taxation and denied certain rights, despite Islamic doctrinal statements that all people were equal, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or religious background.

Similar tensions between doctrine and practice existed in societies that embraced Buddhism as well, despite the faith being often lauded as the prototypical extreme moralizing religion. As the Axial Religion Overview chapter notes, the role of women in Buddhism is particularly fraught, as there has been much debate and controversy over the opinion of the Buddha himself, Siddhārtha Gautama, on the importance of gender for one's quest to attain enlightenment. There is evidence that Siddhārtha opposed the inclusion of women in the order of Buddhist practitioners, though women played active roles in the faith's spread into East and Southeast Asia. In Japan, notably, women were often the most active sponsors of Buddhist institutions and the dissemination of Buddhist texts. Similarly, the ostensible adoption of Buddhist ideals did not prevent these same societies from maintaining many inegalitarian practices, such as slavery, strict social class systems, and gender inequality. Indeed, in spite of the long history of women holding positions of prominence as patrons of Buddhist learning in Japan, by the late first millennium CE women were being systematically relegated to inferior positions or even excluded from official Buddhist roles (see the Japan chapter for details).

This is not to deny the gains made by many people who lived in societies where axial ideologies were embraced; the articulation of egalitarian, universalizing ideals in itself may have laid the foundation for later improvements in the real rights and privileges enjoyed by marginalized groups, however gradual these may have been. Still, it is important not to lose sight of the extent to which these supposedly moralizing religions helped to promulgate rules that restricted the rights of women, foreigners, and the poor, that allowed for and at times justified slavery, and that often sanctioned the violent devastation of indigenous populations (as is abundantly illustrated in the chapters on Highland Peru and the Mississippi Valley and in the Late Complexity Survey).

Axiality and the megasociety threshold

A plausible explanation for the rise of axiality is that societies past a certain threshold of social scale and complexity become vulnerable to collapse, whether due to internal divisions or external attack (cf. Mullins et al. 2018). Some evidence to support this view comes from a recent study of one major feature of axiality, the rise of moralizing gods (Whitehouse et al. 2019). In this study, we analyzed data on social complexity and religion over 10,000 years in over 400 societies drawn from a stratified sample of 30 world regions. Our principal interest in this study was in just one of the 12 features of axiality: the presence of "moralizing gods." To capture this, we used two types of measures, one widely used in the literature on "high gods" (Murdoch 1967) and another relating to broad supernatural punishment conceived as "a supernatural agent or process that reliably monitors and punishes selfish actions" (Watts et al. 2016). To be coded as present, the belief in such a supernatural process had to be widely held, relevant to sanctioning a variety of uncooperative behaviors, and applicable to a broad range of people in the community. We focused in particular on three aspects of natural morality: the rules to act fairly, reciprocate favors, and to be loyal to the group. If any of these three rules were supernaturally enforced, we counted "broad supernatural punishment" as present.

We found that belief in moralizing gods usually *followed* the rise of social complexity and tended to appear after the emergence of "megasocieties," corresponding to populations greater than around one million people. For example, the Achaemenid rulers of the Persian Empire (which was the first mega-empire to govern a population numbering in the tens of millions) adopted Zoroastrianism, a deeply moralizing and universalizing religion, as its central ruling ideology (see discussion in the Iran chapter in this volume). Another example is the adoption of Buddhism, another profoundly moralizing religion, by Aśoka the Great and his family, ruler of the large South Asian Mauryan Empire, and the religion's popularity among similarly large or growing societies throughout East and Southeast Asia shortly after (see the corresponding chapters in this volume for details). In China, the first glimmerings of moralistic supernatural punishment appear during the Western Zhou period, centuries after the rise of megasocieties there (see the North China chapter).

It appears, therefore, that a belief in moralizing gods was not a prerequisite for the expansion in the social scale of complex human societies, but may have been a cultural adaptation that only became necessary to maintain cooperation in societies once they had exceeded a certain size. In particular, the megasociety threshold may represent a point at which societies become fragile due to internal divisions based on ethnicity or class, exacerbated by harsh, exploitative rule. One striking example of how complex societies tend to increase in stability with time, as they accumulate various institutions (including, but not limited to, moralizing gods) is China. Scholars such as Victoria Tin-bor Hui (2005) have noted that the periodic state

collapses that characterized the imperial period of Chinese history gradually became less severe (as measured, for example, by the degree to which population declined) and periods between a collapse and subsequent reunification became shorter; this is mirrored by an increase in the number and importance of moralizing ideologies present in the area, along with the adoption of more and more rules and policies aimed at distributing wealth and power. A similar model would explain many of the other patterns observed in the preceding chapters, even accounting for the apparently precocious appearance of axial-type traits by Bronze Age societies in, for instance, Egypt and Anatolia, following on the heels of imperialistic expansions.

Admittedly, the above account represents only part of the story about the rise of axiality in world history. It focuses on the emergence of just one of the 12 features of interest and only 3 of the 7 rules that we have claimed to constitute natural morality. And it fails to account for the apparent lack of axiality in the Inca state, a large, centralized empire that certainly passed the megasociety threshold. Likewise, in many cases, even in societies where many of these 12 principles were adopted, their application was in practice restricted to certain groups (e.g. male citizens; see discussion above), or they were soon diluted following the re-emergence of more "archaic" ruling strategies. For instance, this dilution can be seen in the increasingly autocratic forms of authority exercised by Byzantine emperors (compared with their earlier Roman counterparts), or in the case of the Lower Mekong Basin, where the political ideology became more rather than less typically archaic over time, despite the widespread adoption of Buddhism as state-sponsored faith (see the Mediterranean Basin and Lower Mekong Basin chapters for details).

Nevertheless, the chapters in this volume support our general reading of the dynamics of axiality and the importance of the megasociety threshold, while also demonstrating how complex and nuanced the situation becomes when a detailed exploration of a global sample of societies is undertaken. On current evidence it would seem that axiality was a new way of restoring faith in old morals, using novel tools to scale up the cohesion needed to keep societies going, rather than an entirely novel moral system. The next step will be to flesh out the picture with more detailed analyses encompassing more variables.

Conclusion

So, was there an Axial Age? We suggest the answer is "sort of," but it was not so much an age as a *stage* in the evolution of social complexity—its distribution globally was wider and its origins historically deeper than anybody previously imagined. We have argued that the initial rise of archaic states led to the distortion and repression of at least some components of natural morality and that axiality provided a way of restoring those principles, and especially their cohesion-building effects, under the guise of a more benevolent regime of supernatural enforcement in ways that applied equally to rich and poor, the powerful and the meek. Such a restoration, we have argued, was necessary for political systems to evolve beyond the megasociety threshold.

This conclusion has many wider ramifications. For example, if the original function of the rise of axial faiths in world history was to hold together fragile, ethnically diverse coalitions, what might declining participation in organized religion mean for the future of societies today? Could secularization in Europe, for example, contribute to the unraveling of supranational forms of governance in the region? If beliefs in moralizing gods decline, what will that mean for cooperation across ethnic groups in the face of migration, warfare, or the spread of xenophobia? Have the exceptions that were allowed to persist in practice alongside these ostensibly universalizing axial faiths left lingering social divisions, which are now resurfacing in many parts of the world? Or are the functions of axial religious ideologies simply being replaced by more secular liberal ideologies? And if so, can they be made fully universal and egalitarian, if not reproduced through cohesion-inducing rituals? Or are we now at the point of a new threshold, an "ultra-megasociety" that will require a whole new toolkit of cultural and institutional reforms to engender global cooperation? To answer these questions, we need to integrate findings from the cognitive, behavioral, and biological sciences with ever more sophisticated analyses of world history. This volume points the way and we hope that many more will follow.