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# Religious Autonomy and Religious Entrepreneurship: An Evolutionary-Institutionalist's Take on the Axial Age

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## Abstract

Through the first millennium BCE, religio-cultural revolutions occurred in China, Greece, Israel, and India. Commonly referred to as the Axial Age, this epoch has been identified by some scholars as period of parallel evolution in which many of the World Religions appeared for the first time and humanity was forever changed. Axial scholarship, however, remains in an early stage as many social scientists and historians question the centrality of this era in the human story, while other unsettled debates revolve around what was common across each case. The paper below considers the Axial Age from an evolutionary-institutionalist's perspective: what was axial was (1) the first successful religio-cultural entrepreneurs in human history and, thereby, (2) the evolution of autonomous religious spheres distinct from kinship and polity. Like the Urban Revolutions that qualitatively transformed human societies 3,000 years prior, the Axial Age represents a reconfiguration of the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space in irreversible ways.

## Keywords

Axial Age – evolution – religion – institutional entrepreneurship – institutional analysis – sociological theory

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## Introduction

The last decade has seen a small, but vibrant group of scholars (e.g., Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock 2005; Bellah and Joas 2012) revisiting and reevaluating Karl Jaspers' (1953) "Axial Age" thesis. Jaspers posited that the first millennium BCE<sup>1</sup> (c. 800–200)—especially the 6th century—was an epoch that witnessed religious revolutions in Israel, Greece, China, and India<sup>2</sup> and (b) was axial because it was a "point in history which gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity" (1953:1). It was a decided break from ancient, primitive, nonliterate, "museum" societies and the beginnings of a gradual lurch towards modernity. Since Jaspers, several questions have dominated the study of the Axial Age including: was it a real moment of parallel evolution or simply the social scientists and philosopher's attempt to put order where, perhaps, there is none?; if we accept as fact that it was a parallel moment of evolution, what were the elements that universally changed?; and, what were the causes and consequences of the Axial Age?

In terms of the first question, it is not incorrect to note that few social scientists accept or even know about the Axial Age. For economic or historical materialists, the Axial Age sits outside the evolutionary path of human history (e.g., Sanderson 1999; Nolan and Lenski 2009). Culture is epiphenomena, and thus religious or cultural revolutions cannot be true forces of change; in many cases, the emphasis is on the ideological or integrative advantages offered imperialist polities in co-opting the universal messages of world religions. Yet, something clearly happened in those four regions that did not happen elsewhere, especially in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia where cultural change would have been most expected; and while I do not see the need to rehash a tired debate between materialism and idealism, it is not a satisfying answer to explain the cultural changes purely in terms of economic or technological advances. Yet, some Social scientists, however, have identified—typically not by name—the Axial Age as a crucial period of change. Weber's (1946a, b)

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1 Any dates from here on will be assumed to occur Before the Common Era in less otherwise noted.

2 Jaspers original list of regions included Persia, because Zoroaster's life was presumed to overlap with the Buddha and Lao Tzu. Though an open debate, most scholars believe he lived—if he was a real person—a millennium prior to the Axial Age (Gnoli 2000; Armstrong 2006). That being said, there have been compelling arguments made that under the Persians, Zoroastrianism became the official religion and signaled an Axial moment in itself; one, which would permeate into the Jewish case through the Diasporic Israelites (Blenkinsopp 1995).

sociology of religion, which Jaspers clearly drew from to construct his own argument, considers this a central moment in the long process of disenchantment and rationalization. More contemporary theories of religious evolution, such as Bellah's (1964) or Wallace's (1966) stage models label the Axial Age an evolutionary leap, respectively, from "Ancient" to "Historic" religion and from Polytheism to Monotheism.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it seems plausible to suggest that something happened in these four places that would have some lasting impact on human societies today.

The paper below chooses, as its starting point, the second question listed above: what were the universal aspects of change worth elucidating. I believe it was a moment of parallel evolution distinguished by it being the first historical moment in which (1) religio-cultural entrepreneurs purposefully *and* successfully struggled for structural and symbolic independence vis-à-vis other elite strata and (2) the religious institutional sphere grew (relatively) autonomous from kinship and polity. Drawing from an evolutionary-institutionalist's perspective (Turner 2003, 2010; Abrutyn 2009, 2013c), it is argued that the Axial Age was to religion, though to a lesser extent, what the Urban Revolution 5,000 years ago was to polity (Eisenstadt 1963; Adams 1966): a set of collectives reacting to real or imagined crises—in the Axial cases, metaphysical crises—by innovating new normative, symbolic, and organizational frameworks that would become the foundations of institutional projects meant to reconstitute the social world (Eisenstadt 1964). Though each collective had varying success because of the unique historical, sociopolitical, and sociocultural conditions, the results were entrepreneurs capable of reconfiguring the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space of society in ways that carved out autonomous religious space (Abrutyn 2013b; Abrutyn and Van Ness 2014).

By no means does this analysis deny the importance of work focused on cultural (Eisenstadt 1986; Elkana 1986; Arnason 2005; Wittrock 2012) or religious (Momigliano 1975; Schwartz 1975; Joas 2012) change, nor does it supplant the recent cognitive-cultural evolutionism found in Bellah's work (2011). I find the recent surge in Axial Age scholarship invigorating. Instead, this paper strives to return to some of Eisenstadt's (1964, 1984) older and more structural discussions of the Axial Age, while blending them with the advances made in neo-evolutionism; a perspective which has eschewed the 19th century evolutionist arguments that favored progressivist models that were naturally unidirectional, unicausal, and often evoked abstracted stages, while gravitating towards multi-level selectionism, multi-linearity, and contingency (Turner

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3 Whether these stage labels are accurate or useful is beside the point. Both try to capture the changes happening then.

2003, 2010; Turner and Maryanski 2008; Runciman 2009; Blute 2010; Abrutyn 2013c; Richerson and Christiansen 2013). In short, entrepreneurs—as Eisenstadt originally imagined them—are the sociocultural equivalent to biological mutations, and thus become the unit of adaptivity and selection; group-selectionism, then, is less about the content of the cultural assemblage and more about a group's success in imposing pro-social, self-sacrificial, and effervescing relational bonds between members (Wilson 2001; Bowles and Gintis 2011; Slingerland et al. 2013). Our analysis begins first with a brief elucidation of the many threads in the Axial Age discussion. As there are several surveys of the literature available (Schwartz 1975; Eisenstadt 1986; Arnason 2005; Bellah 2005; Armstrong 2006; Wittrock 2012), this overview is meant to highlight the points of departure and foundational blocks that this paper recognizes.

### The Evolution of the Axial Idea

Weber was interested in the seemingly synchronous emergence of several charismatic carrier groups around the teachings and energy of “prophets” like Isaiah, Confucius, and Buddha. For his larger aims, he saw the Judaic case as the beginnings of western disenchantment and, eventually, the peculiar form of European capitalism that would forever alter the world's trajectory. Jaspers, however, had a very different take. A sort of neo-Hegelian, Jaspers deemed the Axial Age as the moment in which humans became aware of their “fall” from God, and history would become the story of reconciling their “one single origin and one goal” (1953:xv). That is, between 800–200, humans took a spiritual and cognitive “leap” forward and the result was a rupture so great that history turned on an axis such that modern humans continue to operate within the logic and framework created then. Despite a dubious teleological argument and a neo-Christian perspective (for a critique, see Assmann 2012), the value (and bane) of Jaspers' work was in his choice of terms—Axial—as it is has been at the forefront of the theoretical debates, and the criticisms leveled by historians, philosophers, and social scientists (cf. Pollock 2005; Runciman 2012).

### *Making Sense of the Axial Age*

The most common debate revolves around whether the Axial Age was indeed *axial*, a moment of parallel evolution, or simply an analytical invention that has taken on a life of its own. This question, of course, has led to a concerted debate about what is Axial or axial (for a more detailed discussion, see Arnason 2005; Bellah 2005). Axiality has been taken to mean the emergence of ecu-

menical visions and social frameworks (Voegelin 1956–74); a “strain toward transcendence . . . a kind of standing back and looking beyond” (Schwartz 1975:3); a severe disjunction between the mundane and supramundane that required new soteriologies and eschatologies<sup>4</sup> to “bridge” this chasm and, thus, the reconfiguration of the political and kinship orders (Eisenstadt 1986); an “age of criticism” (Momigliano 1975), defined by the appearance of strata leveling social and/or political theories of protest and morality (e.g., Thapar 1975); the emergence of metacognition, thinking about thinking, or what is often called “second-order” thinking (Elkana 1986); and, most recently, the introduction of agency, historicity, and reflexivity in cultural systems (Wittrock 2012). The question remains an open and interesting one, though the answer is beyond the scope of this discussion.

A second, and less prominent debate, centers on two interrelated questions: besides “cultural” or “religious” changes, what changed across all four cases and were there common origins/causes affecting each one? The first part of this question becomes especially important when searching for sociological explanations for the “negative” cases like Mesopotamia or Egypt which did not have Axial Ages in spite of their politically, economically, and culturally advanced centers. In the mid-14th century, Egypt appears to have come the closest when Pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1353–1336) tossed the priests from the temples along with all of the gods except the sun god Re. Often credited as the first appearance of monotheism, Akhenaten’s new religion was more likely monolatrous—or the worship of a single god while recognizing the existence of other gods. His “revolution,” however, would only last his lifetime, as his successor Tutankhamen would allow the priests to return who reinstalled the old Egyptian polytheism. Why did his reforms fail? This case is instructive and will inform the theory below: his hostility to the priests, who he chased out during his reign, weakened his ability to articulate his revelation and influence the population.

The second question, on causality, is stickier. Historians and philosophers interested in the Axial Age generally avoid the “how” and “why” questions; social scientists, in the past, have been mostly interested in finding the shared features of the Axial Age—as an historical ideal type—and considering the consequences (Schwartz 1975; Eisenstadt 1986). Materialist arguments have emerged that identify advances such as complex writing, or some other technological force, as some sort of engine of religious evolution (Sanderson and Roberts 2008; Bellah 2011). Of course, this explanation has its weaknesses.

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4 Soteriologies are “systems” of salvation, while eschatologies are “systems” of the ‘end’ or final days (cf. Weber 1946a, b; Eliade 1959).

For one, writing had existed for nearly three millennia before the Axial Age, which calls into question how much lag can occur before a causal mechanism is no longer related to the outcome. But, one might argue the Hebrews and Greeks developed an alphabet, which simplified writing. Again, as experts on the Israelites demonstrate, writing in scribal circles in Israel—all the way through the writing/editing/canonization of the Hebrew Bible—were extremely similar to other Near Eastern polities' scribes (van der Toorn 2007). In essence, writing was not about writing but about oral performance. Furthermore, the writing-thesis cannot explain the Chinese case where an alphabet did not appear, and becomes complicated in the Indian example as many of the texts were not written until late in the Axial Age; and in some cases, afterward. (Thapar 2004). Bio-social theories, like Bellah's (2011) recent masterpiece, often fall back on old functionalist evolutionism which implicitly lump non-literate religions as "primitive" and literate, "world" religions as advanced. Bellah, of course, cites ethnographic evidence to the contrary (cf. Radin 1937 [1957]). Indeed, while Bellah's (2011) work is, again, interesting and a wonderful contribution to the debate, it raises too many questions without satisfactorily answering "why" or "how."<sup>5</sup> To be sure, it might not be possible to construct a general theory explaining all four cases, nor am I convinced it is even necessary.<sup>6</sup> And, while I will offer some possible causes below, I believe that the question regarding what changed structurally and organizationally may be more fruitfully answered as it stands today. Thus, while I will tentatively point in some possible directions, future research will have to resolve the causal question more systematically.

One final note is worth expounding. In my discussion of materialism or bio-social theories above, it was not meant to advance an idealist argument. Culture does not evolve on its own, yet it is true that culture can be a motivating force of change in addition to or apart from political or economic changes. Indeed, as religious spheres become autonomous, many changes are internal, symbolic or normative changes predicated on self-reflexivity (Luhmann 2012).

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5 In the process of writing and revising this paper, Dr. Robert Bellah passed away. The author would like to express his profound respect for Dr. Bellah's work, and note how much inspiration was derived from his endless quest for knowledge and understanding of religious change.

6 An equally crucial question often unasked is how much of these revolutions were effected independently, but endogenous forces and how much of an effect did diffusion have? Noted previously, the exiled Israelites likely came into contact with monotheistic Zoroastrianism, while constantly expanding trade routes would have exposed the Greeks to the Chinese, and the Indians and Chinese to each other. Whether religious ideas were exchanged or not may remain speculative, but it is indeed worth considering.

Further, in the Axial Age cases, radically new cultural assemblages were not so much epiphenomena to economic or political changes, but emerged in opposition to changes in the political/economic sphere or because of the limits of these spheres' ability to satisfactorily integrate and regulate disparate populations, as well as produce consensual meaning complexes. An evolutionary-institutionalist perspective not only maintains, then, that religious development may be independent of changes in other spheres, but religious evolution is a product of religious entrepreneurs creating, combining, articulating, and struggling to impose new cultural assemblages on other strata of society in ways that can reconfigure the broader societal frameworks for (inter) action, exchange, and communication (Abrutyn 2013b, 2014). This perspective is not necessarily a rejection of the myriad takes on the Axial Age, rather it argues that cultural change is the product of real actors and is not always tied to other types of change.

### *What Was Axial about the Axial Age?*

The theoretical argument offered below is simple. First, what was "axial" about the Axial Age was that it was a period in which the first successful institutional projects (Colomy 1998) culminating—in varying degrees—in autonomous religious spheres occurred (Abrutyn 2013b). These projects were different from previous ones like Akhenaten's because they lasted longer than one generation, and in many cases, they would have long-term impacts on the trajectory of one or more societies. In essence, something about the Axial Age presented religious entrepreneurs with both the crises (Eisenstadt 1984), elements to build new cultural assemblages, and justification for their projects in ways that would be evolutionarily significant. My take on evolution differs from the old stage-models that were unilinear, progressivist, and teleological; I take Assmann (2012:370) serious when he remarked, "Monotheism is not a more developed state of polytheism. Polytheism does not "lead" to monotheism as its ultimate state of maturity." Indeed, under historical, archaeological, sociological, and theological scrutiny, the old unilinear, progressivist theories that placed monotheism as the highest or ultimate end in religious evolution are no longer tenable (Wallace 1966), nor are models that dichotomize nonliterate/literate religions in terms of the evolution of "high" gods (Swanson 1966). These simplistic models ignore the fact that nonliterate societies had high gods (Radin 1937 [1957]; Stark 2007), while not all Axial cases "ended" in monotheism (van der Toorn 2007; Arnason 2012). In essence, stage models are unsatisfying because they try to fit several cases with very important differences into a single type while implicitly or explicitly assuming directionality (Bellah 1964, 2011).

Sociocultural evolution is a product of improbable, intersecting ingredients: real or imagined exogenous and endogenous exigencies generate selection pressures that are sometimes felt, other times unperceived or ignored; entrepreneurs innovate and try to mobilize resources in both certain and uncertain sociopolitical systems; some entrepreneurs are more skilled, carry a more resonant frame, and are more flexible in accommodating the reactions of elites or other strata, while others collapse under the weight of their own rigidity. What makes the Axial Age so interesting, is that it was a period closest to the Urban Revolution in that several relatively independent regions evolved somewhat synchronously. Consider some of crucial common factors: myriad charismatic prophet-like individuals clustered around the same time; in their generalized form, similar religious or cultural solutions posited—e.g., personal soteriologies; new collectives with wider and more inclusive membership criteria appeared; and, religious strata appeared, capable of demarcating the boundaries between their sphere of reality and others, but now with an interest in penetrating these other spheres and the resources necessary for realizing it. But, what may have been parallel quickly diverged under the variables that makes each case and its trajectory so unique: the reaction of political elites and other strata; the adjustments made by the entrepreneurs in the face of these reactions; the strategies employed, and their efficacy, against competing cosmological entrepreneurs.

Evolutionary-institutionalism, then, conceptualizes entrepreneurs as real historical forces whose cultural assemblages allow them to generate internal group solidarity used to struggle for their independence and, ultimately, “install” their assemblage within the structural and cultural framework of an autonomous institutional sphere. This is where true sociocultural evolution occurs: within the lasting frameworks of institutional spheres (Abrutyn 2009, 2013c). There are no “stages” because autonomy fluctuates too much, but we can identify different societal types by the typical institutional arrangements: hunter-gatherers tend to be characterized by kinship spheres dominating all other spheres like polity and economy such that economic actions are deeply informed by and inextricably linked to kinship logic (Nolan and Lenski 2009). In the first urban states of Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, or Mesoamerica, political spheres emerged that were not purely independent from kinship, but which constituted discrete physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space in which the logic of interaction, exchange, and communication was organizationally, symbolically, and normatively distinct from kinship (Eisenstadt 1963); that is, the codes and messages, as well as the meanings surrounding these four dimensions of space, become rooted either in *love/loyalty* or *power*—the gen-

eralized symbolic media of kinship and polity, respectively (Abrutyn and Turner 2011).<sup>7</sup>

The Axial Age was a similar moment. Except, the medium of exchange, interaction, and communication was different: *sacredness* fused with *piety* and *truth* (Abrutyn 2013b). But, what is of central importance was that Axiality came in the form of a new institutional sphere becoming autonomous for the first time in human history; and, as opposed to kinship which is always provincial and polity which is always delimited by physical boundaries, this sphere was capable of stretching its boundaries much further because it extended the criteria for membership beyond old local, tribal, or purely ethnic definitions. Not surprisingly, others interested in the Axial Age realized this as well, but never took the argument to its sociological conclusion as it was always one of many factors of interest. Eisenstadt himself argued that the lasting axial contributions were found in the creation and maintenance of newly “autonomous spheres of society, regulated by autonomous criteria” (2012:279). Others, like Charles Taylor (2012), have referred to the process as one of “disembedding” human concerns related to integration, origins of humanity, and morality/piety from kinship and polity and embedding them in the logic of religion. Even skeptics of Axiality like Assmann (2012) and Pollock (2005:410) see it as rooted in “a distinction” or “disconnect” of religious elements from other “spheres of culture and power.” And, finally, Wittrock (2012:105) describes new groups—entrepreneurs in our terminology—or “interpreters of new ideas” as creating or finding “some arenas . . . [with] some degree of autonomy.” I see this as a point of agreement and of departure. On the one hand, much of the conceptualization of, say, Wittrock’s (2012) discussion of reflexivity is easily grafted onto Luhmann’s (2012) theory of system self-referentiality. On the other hand, placing the Axial Age and these discussions within a broader neo-evolutionary framework provides depth and breadth that supplements these discussions, but also makes them more robust.

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7 Because autonomy is never measured in kind, and therefore never “total,” it would be inaccurate to describe *all* kinship or *all* political interactions or exchanges as dominated purely by one medium or the other. Indeed, at this early stage in political evolution, the two spheres are not as discrete as they would become later. But, what I am saying is that political interactions and exchanges, aggregated over a space of time, increasingly become identifiably different in their logic both by the actors partaking in them, observers, and those reflecting on them later.

## Evolutionary-Institutionalism and Axiality

Neo-evolutionary theories generally begin with several assumptions, regardless of the unit of adaptation or evolution that they focuses on.<sup>8</sup> First, sociocultural evolution—whether the general transformation of human societies over the long-run or temporally-bound synchronous or diachronic cases—does not follow a set of stages. *A posteriori*, it is possible to identify for heuristic purposes, “types” of societies, but the idea that societal change follows a single, progressive path or is marching towards something in particular has generally been rejected. This is a good thing for reasons discussed above. Second, nearly all neo-evolutionists have begun to adopt or at least accept multi-level selection models (cf. Turner and Maryanski 2008; Runciman 2009; Richerson and Christiansen 2013). Typically, scholars do not focus on religion as *Religion*—or a singular social phenomena moving in lockstep with humanity—but rather on smaller units of analysis like institutional spheres (Turner 2003; Richerson and Henrich 2012), social systems (Luhmann 2012), or the group (Wilson 2001; Bowles and Gintis 2011). Third, several neo-evolutionists have rejected a strict Darwinian approach to sociocultural evolution in favor of the purposeful, conscious, and innovative efforts of groups. Drawing from classical theory, I believe two different and complementary models can be employed (cf. Turner and Maryanski 2008): a Durkheimian model that modifies Darwin’s competition-for-resources, conceptualizing groups as struggling over existing resources with some “winning” and others diversifying to survive, seeking out new niches, or creating new niches; and, a Spencerian model in which pressures emerge because existing structural or cultural solutions are not deemed capable of handling a real or perceived problem facing the group, and new frameworks are searched for. These three assumptions have improved evolutionary theory’s flexibility considerably, and have made it more easily integrated with historical analyses.

For our purposes, the Axial Age is a case of Spencerian evolutionary processes, in which several macro-level exigencies intersect—amplifying each other—and put pressure on individuals and groups to innovate in the face of real or imagined threats to their material and/or ideal interests. These groups

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8 Though sociobiologists, evolutionary psychologists, and strict Darwinian cultural evolutionists are included in the “neo-evolutionary” subfield, I omit them for this discussion. For one, they are generally interested in a different question: where does religion come from? Though I think this is an interesting question, it is beyond the scope of this paper as I am interested in how cultural evolves once it already exists and not whether a social phenomenon’s origins can be reduced to the brain or some interaction between the two.

successfully generated new or recombined cultural assemblages that allowed them—and *not general society*—to (a) survive; (b) reproduce their cultural assemblages intergenerationally; (c) convince other strata that their “goods” and “services” were just, moral, and “rooted in the attempt to come into contact with the very essence of being . . . to what is seen as sacred and fundamental” vis-à-vis competitors or existing solutions (Eisenstadt in Weber 1968:xix); and (d) leverage power-dependence into both social mobility and the capability of reconfiguring the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic institutional space. The adaptive unit, then, is the group: entrepreneurs innovate symbolically, normatively, and organizationally (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2014) and, when “successful,” can generate powerful collective emotions (Summers-Effler 2009) that attach members to each other, the group, and a larger, substantive institutional sphere (Lawler et al. 2009), and also create powerful commitment and, sometimes, merger to the social and role identity associated with these attachments (Hogg 2006). The consequence is greater prosocial, altruistic, self-sacrificial behavior (Wilson 2001; Slingerland et al. 2013) and, thereby, a higher likelihood of the cultural assemblage surviving and even spreading (for examples, see Stark 2006).

Fitness, if that is even a useful concept, can be measured in three interdependent, yet interrelated ways: (1) a group’s ability to sustain a continuous flow of resources to maintain its routines; (2) a group’s success in transmitting its cultural assemblage across generations; and, (3) the degree to which that group can institutionalize their assemblage within an existing or newly autonomous institutional domain such that significant portions of the population come to take for granted the group’s assemblage as legitimate or the group’s vision of reality is imposed through normative and regulatory mechanisms. Thus, one could feasibly measure the success of each Axial Age entrepreneur, including those that “failed” such as the Pythagoreans; and one could even compare these to other entrepreneurs at other times like Akhenaten or Pope Gregory VII and his inner circle.

If groups are the adaptive unit, what evolve are institutional domains. Sociocultural evolution is an interplay between the environmental conditions that generate selection pressures and delimit responses, the skill, effort, and luck of institutional entrepreneurs responding to these pressures, and the reaction these efforts receive from elites and, importantly, other strata. Success may be temporary or long-lasting in the form of institutional autonomy. The Axial Age, as such, reflects a historical moment of parallel evolution in which *religious* entrepreneurship became a truly transformative engine for the first time in human history. Although the divergence in outcomes across all four cases points to the variation in conditions, efforts and goals of the specific

entrepreneurs, and the reactions to their projects by elites, other strata, and the masses, the same basic process was at work across cases.

### *Institutions and Entrepreneurs*

Institutional spheres are defined as *macro structural and cultural spheres of action, exchange, and communication that reflect past adaptive attempts to resolve basic human concerns*. Six institutions are generally recognized as ubiquitous to human societies—polity, religion, kinship, economy, law, and education (Turner 2003)—while several others have been identified, recently, as contemporary spheres of consequence—e.g., science, medicine, media, art, and sport (Abrutyn 2009). Institutional domains are not governments, churches, or families, but rather are constituted by these organizational units and other actors as well (Abrutyn and Turner 2011); these individuals, collectives, and clusters of collectives (e.g., fields) are distributed in institutional space along horizontal and vertical divisions of labor and with respect to their relative distance from one institutional core or another (Abrutyn 2013c). As institutional spheres grow more autonomous, they become increasingly different from each other in phenomenological ways: interactions, exchanges, and communication become generalized and shaped by one or more “indigenous” symbolic media; media “travels” to and from the core—where they are “produced”—and circulate along the divisions of labor as electricity is conducted through copper wire. The pursuit and acquisition of media—which begins with learning the institution’s specialized language—makes the institutional sphere real in the sense that a significant proportion of the population can think and talk about it in reified terms. Entrepreneurs are responsible for carving out these institutional spheres, producing and distributing these cultural goods and visions of reality, and, importantly, protecting the core’s integrity. Finally, autonomy is a struggle, and always in threat of being lost.

Therefore, institutions and entrepreneurs are linked together by the process of autonomy, which is a key source of variation and thus comparative analysis. Institutional autonomy is the process by which (1) *institutional entrepreneurs* struggle and secure some degree of structural and symbolic independence and (2) are able to reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space such that their (a) independence is protected and sustained, (b) influence expands beyond their own group’s membership, and (c) ability to help “steer” society grows. Institutions are *never fully autonomous*, rather autonomy is measured in degree and is reversible. Autonomy implies a *deep* restructuring of actions, goals, and decisions that differentiation, as a master process, simply does not. This is because autonomy drives a process of cultural generalization that standardizes the language—and, thereby, value-orientations, ideologies,

norms, and discourse—with which people describe their institutional roles, justify, interpret, and evaluate their actions as well as others, and come to orient themselves towards the present and future. Autonomy also creates a new stratification system that finds its base within the uneven distribution of generalized symbolic media and other institutional resources. Religious spheres evaluate esteem and competence, for instance, based on “how much” *sacredness/piety* a person or collective has access to; it is also where the boundaries and otherness become thrown in sharp relief. A brief historical example should better illustrate what autonomy is and why it is different from functionalism’s master process differentiation.

When we examine chiefdoms versus the first states in Mesopotamia, China, and Egypt, the structural and cultural elements of a polity lacking autonomy, or moderate levels of autonomy become discernible in relation to a polity with some degree of autonomy (for a more detailed discussion, see Earle 1991; Johnson and Earle 2000). In essence, chiefdoms consist of differentiated role positions—chiefs and, in more complex chiefdoms, their lieutenants—yet, these positions are deeply embedded within kinship relationships; goals, decisions, and actions remain tethered to kinship logic; and, while power exists, it is not a medium facilitating generalized political exchange, interaction, or communication, as these continue to be rooted in the media of kinship—*loyalty* (Turner 2010). 5,000 years ago, the first true political entrepreneurs appear and begin to carve out discrete institutional spheres for their activities. On the macro-level, this means cutting out discrete physical, temporal, social, and symbolic spaces that are known as political by a significant proportion of the population. Or, as Joyce (2000:71–2) describes early political space: “By creating different kinds of space within sites, the continuing elaboration of monumental architecture served to create spatial arenas with restricted access . . . [affecting] the patterns of habitual movement of all the inhabitants of the site, stratifying space and hence the people who were allowed access to different space, creating and marking centers and peripheries.” On the meso-level, this includes creating new organizational units and clusters of organizations whose sole or primary purpose for existence serves to protect the fragile political core as well as facilitate the circulation and exchange of *power* as a medium of exchange (Adams 1966; Flannery 1972). Finally, institutional autonomy has a micro-level phenomenological impact: political goals, for instance, become experienced and understood as different “from goals of other spheres or groups in society” in that their “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). In essence, the polity became an institutional sphere—a

macrostructural and cultural *milieu* in which exchanges, interactions, and communication were *relatively* discrete from kinship or religion.

Entrepreneurs, in Eisenstadt's (1964) estimation, are analogous to biological mutations: their efforts can be neutral (which they generally are), maladaptive, or beneficial. Entrepreneurs, however, are important because they add a sense of contingency to evolution. First, entrepreneurs are potentially radical, in that they can muster up charismatic authority while offering dramatically new normative, symbolic, and organizational frameworks (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2014). Second, their efforts may not actually succeed, but rather may be co-opted or destroyed by existing elites (Colomy 1998). Furthermore, once a project has been pursued it is "out there" for any future group to borrow from or even use. Hence, projects, entrepreneurs, and the reactions from other strata, especially elites, force evolution along winding, multi-linear paths; even if the conditions generating entrepreneurship were similar across several cases. Third, because autonomy is a process and not a state, and because autonomy is tied to entrepreneurial projects and several contingencies, the crystallization of a new normative, organizational, and symbolic framework is rarely something completed, but rather something protean. In the short-run, these new frameworks may be adaptive, but Durkheimian selection pressures—e.g., heterodoxies (Eisenstadt 1984)—may create an impulse toward competition, plurality, and new exigencies, and thus autonomy is an incomplete process. But, when autonomy is secured to some degree, entrepreneurs are capable of inscribing their new goals and values and ideologies into the very fabric of physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space; making their changes unconscious.

In sum, it is argued that the Axial Age was *axial* precisely for the fact that it was the second time in human history that an institutional domain and a new type of entrepreneur reconfigured social reality; an irreversible mark, if you will. Political autonomy was the first event of note, happening in similar fashion first in China, Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, and then in Peru and Mesoamerica. Religious autonomy, seen through an evolutionary-institutional historiography, was the second such epoch, with religio-cultural entrepreneurs pushing back against their political counterparts in Greece, China, India, and Israel. In no way does this deny the potential impact other religious entrepreneurs could or did have. The point is that it was the *first* moment, as it has obviously repeated itself several times: Rome during the 1st and 4th centuries, and then again during the 11th and 12th centuries; Saudi Arabia/Iran during the 7th and 8th centuries; China during the Sung dynasties in the 11th and 12th centuries. Thus, the first millennium is distinct only because it was the first moment of religious entrepreneurs at that scale, but not only was it

not the last time religious entrepreneurs mattered—indeed, they matter all throughout the world today (Almond et al. 2003). And, because the political “revolutions” that occurred before the Axial Age happened, there are reasons to believe it wasn’t the last moment of axiality. Some scholars, for example, suggest that a second “Axial Age” began with the Enlightenment (Bondarenko 2011), though I believe the scientific revolution is different enough from the religious ones occurring in the first millennium BCE to give its own due. However, it is plausible to suggest the evolution of legal autonomy during the 11th and 12th centuries—the Gregorian reformation—was as *axial* a moment in western civilization, if not more so, than the first millennium (Berman 1983; Abrutyn 2009).

### *Religious Autonomy and the Axial Age*

Wittrock (2005:68) notes, the Axial Age “is a form of reaction to a new type of human condition where neither the structures of kinship and physical proximity, nor those of self-legitimizing empire, suffice any longer to embed the individual in a context of meaning and familiarity.” If political autonomy was a process generated by physical, ecological, and demographic forces generate practical problems (Abrutyn and Lawrence 2010), then it stands to reason that the evolution of religious autonomy has some basis in material forces, yet should be driven by ideal/cultural—*existential*—forces as well.

### Entrepreneurship

The marriage between entrepreneurship and selection process is sparked and intensified where real or perceived crises intersect with one another, and provide the canvas upon which entrepreneurs can innovate, attack existing solutions, and often create diversions for existing entrepreneurs. The crises themselves vary, but ultimately must be perceived as threatening to some group’s existence and interests; this stratum must come to believe or propagate the belief that these exigencies threaten other strata’s interests too. Qualitative transformative moments related to cosmological entrepreneurs are more likely to appear where multiple exigencies intersect and amplify each other, and a sense of decay or pollution permeates social reality (Eisenstadt 1964; Alexander 1988). As such, entrepreneurs can argue that their solutions are efficient, just, and moral while those in control are inefficient, unjust, and immoral (Colomy 1998). It is only when entrepreneurs are able to articulate a resonant justification for the superiority of their institutional project vis-à-vis extant conditions that they become capable of drawing other strata into their ‘movement’ (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2014). If entrepreneurs can gain a foothold, their

projects can mature in the sense that they react, adjust, accommodate, and recalibrate their projects to reflect their successes and failures, and changes in the sociocultural environment.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing from evolutionary theory and Eisenstadt's work, the intersection between exigency and entrepreneurs is only fruitful where certain conditions are met. For one, existing power structures must either permit or be weak enough for entrepreneurs to pursue their goals. Second, a certain amount of resources must be available. Eisenstadt calls these "free" resources, but in essence, Buddhist monasteries would not have been possible two thousand years before hand as there simply were not enough "free" material resources to support them (Walsh 2009). Third, religious entrepreneurship is one type of cosmological entrepreneurship and, thus, establishing a legitimate claim to sole, or dominant, authority over the production and distribution of resources associated with *sacredness*, *truth*, and *knowledge* was essential to religious autonomy and to articulating culturally resonant frames that other strata found appealing. It was crucial to escape the yoke of political dependence found among other scribes in Mesopotamia or Egypt (Machinist 1986; van der Toorn 2007), and find alternative bases of human and material support (e.g., Walsh 2009; Abrutyn 2014).

We can examine concrete examples of (pre-Axial) religious collectives versus (Axial/post-Axial) religious entrepreneurs to underscore their differences. In Mesopotamia, we find the former. Temples were invariably and inextricably tied to Palaces (Liverani 2006), in that they were centralized grain storage sites, centers of scribal activity and record keeping, and, while they belonged—technically—to the deity that literally lived there, after the Akkadian king, Naram-Sin's, reign near the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, Mesopotamian kings became divine and, as the closest thing to god, generally owned temple land (van de Mieroop 2004). In essence, the priests were specialists different in function and status from potters or weavers, but political actors nonetheless because they were power- and resource-dependent on political entrepreneurs. According to Machinist (1986:202), the "nature of literacy in Mesopotamia . . .

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9 As noted already, it is often the case that the initial entrepreneurs do not complete the project, but rather it goes through numerous iterations and becomes the rallying cry for myriad generations of entrepreneurs. For instance, the Israelite prophets were the first entrepreneurial unit, but with Josiah's kingship (639–609), the Deuteronomists became the carriers of their program during the exile and, finally, an uneasy coalition between the Deuteronomists and the Priestly class carried the cultural assemblage out of the exile—fully redacted and altered—and into the actual project of institution-building during the fifth and four centuries (Smith 1987; Blenkinsopp 1995).

was so complex and cumbersome a skill [and] the expense involved . . . so considerable . . . it could only be borne by the ruling groups"; hence, religious actors were "far from establishing an independent cultural and political base," but rather "continued to serve the ruling group." The religious entrepreneurs that we find in Israel (Uffenheimer 1986; Smith 1987)—whether it was the marginalized prophets or the Exilic priestly class—or in India (Thapar 1975, 2004) were entirely different. Their goals, though variable in extremity, were directed towards erecting a discrete religious sphere apart from the polity and kinship domains (Eisenstadt 1986, 2012). They generally found themselves outside of the political space, at first at least; they sought to find material and human resources away from the polity, thereby reducing their dependency; and they shifted the focus from community to personal soteriologies that emphasized paths and ethical principles for the common person.

Of course, as noted above, there were no inevitable Axial trajectories. The Pythagoreans were an Axial religious movement that has faded into the mists of history, while the Confucians were successful but the unique political and economic conditions of China led them to be far closer to the political entrepreneurial class than, say, their Indian or Israelite counterparts. It remains an open and interesting question as to why Mesopotamia and/or Egypt never had Axial moments—or, perhaps more accurately, lasting Axial moments. In terms of the latter I would posit that Akhenaton's brief reign, as discussed briefly above, had the potential. It appears, however, as if he alienated the very collectives he would have needed to expand the religious spheres boundaries; it may have been one of the first recorded cults "of the individual" and thus died with him. Mesopotamia demands much more attention than is appropriate here. In part, the near constant rise and fall of political entities shaped by different ethnic groups may have been a factor; and, as the cultural center of the Near East for three millennia, its religious system proved quite flexible in including more and more gods of its conquered peoples without upsetting the balance. What may have been its strength—plurality—may, like Rome (Stark 2006), ultimately been its undoing, the obstacle to Axiality, and the catalyst for the Israelite and Greek axial ages. These questions, and others like them, deserve much more systematic analysis than is possible in this paper.

### Variation

How can we account for variation in the content, trajectory, and outcome of the institutional projects across cases? First, trajectories are always dependent on the macro-level exigencies and forces generating real or perceived crises—though these will receive greater treatment below, an exigency such as economic inequality would be an obvious candidate to intensify the push for

ethical arguments, while political instability or political overreach will condition different political theories. Second, each case is constrained by the arraignment of institutional spheres, the principal actors doing the entrepreneurship, and their object(s) of derision. If it is the monarchs of Israel and the overlords of Assyria it will look very different from Plato's attack on the Sophists or the Buddhist challenge to Vedic Brahmanism. Third, how do the various groups of interest—in particular, elites, competitors, and various other strata being appealed to—react? Fourth, how rich and diverse are the alternative bases of potential resources available? Less diversity will alter the message and the possibility for success as much as more diversity. Fifth, how skillful are the entrepreneurs in addition to how “inviting” are their cultural assemblages?

Our sixth and final condition deserves special attention: the number of religious or cosmological competitors greatly accelerates the advance of entrepreneurship, while paradoxically creating messaging-problems. This argument is inherent in Eisenstadt's (1984) work on heterodoxies as a central dynamic force. In essence, competition drives entrepreneurs to clarify their messages and draw greater distinctions, and as Durkheim predicted, diversify these messages; in other cases, unpredictable alliances are formed in which tenuous agreements spawn contradictory compromises that can be reinterpreted in later generations, where revitalization projects appear. In any case, we find evidence that the number of religio-cultural entrepreneurs extant matters, and success breeds more risk-taking: for instance, in China—from the years 365 to 235—an abnormally “high creative” density of 2.33 major and 2.67 secondary philosophers per generation appear, while during the same time in Greece, we find 2 major and 5 minor philosophers per generation (Collins 1998:57–8).

#### Causes?

We turn now to the forces generating crisis, which, admittedly, are tentative and demand systematic historical and archaeological analysis beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I suggest some parallel forces that appear common to two or more of the cases. Again, there are no general patterns here, but several identifiable exogenous and endogenous problems found in each case in varying valences. And, while exigencies like population booms do not necessarily lead to entrepreneurship, the Axial Age is unique in that several exigencies—internal and external to each case—intersected in rapid and amplified fashion while several intellectual circles perceived and reacted to these exigencies; political elites were helpless to stifle entrepreneurship entirely because these exigencies demanded resources and attention.

First, with the onset of the Iron Age in the 11th/10th centuries, we find technological and economic forces generating pressures in direct and indirect ways

(Wittrock 2012:104ff.; also Sanderson 1999). Iron created a massive economic boom that intensified agriculture (cf. Sherratt and Sherratt 1993; Liverani 2005). As a result, populations grew in size, cities in density, and transportation technologies improved. All of which made migration more feasible (and often more necessary), while also expanding long-distance trade; cultural contact, or *moral density* as Durkheim termed it, generates innovation. The downside, of course, was new forms of stratification and, with monopolies over new means of production possible, consolidation of arable land meant a bigger dispossessed class. A second urban revolution occurred as the number of cities with 30,000 or more people (between 650–430 BCE) jumped from 20 to 51 and the total urban population grew from 894,000 to 2,877,000 (Sanderson 1999:111); a period which preceded the explosion of Chinese and Greek philosophers noted above.

Why would this matter for the Axial Age and religious entrepreneurship? First, many of the Axial Age religio-cultural frames were directed towards the “masses” and not the political elite. “Feeding” the gods was abandoned in favor of personal soteriologies (Stark 2007). Part of this shift in religious logic must have been driven by the exponential growth in size, visibility, and “quantifiable” social harm of economic inequality found in urban environments like Jerusalem—consider, for instance, the fact that Elijah and most of the prophets came from the “dispossessed” small farmer class (Blenkinsopp 1995). Additionally, a more complex division of labor that potentially offered alternative bases of resources for religious entrepreneurs who were marginalized from the temple or the court or who sought to free themselves from these polluted and decaying spaces became more prominent. Further, transportation and communication technologies have long been identified with social psychological and sociological consequences (Hawley 1986). We should expect that the Axial Age was no different as natal birthplaces, and ascriptive social ties, no longer meant the same thing; long-distance trade, imperialist policies, and population flows “shrunk” the world, encouraged inter-cultural interaction, and made particularist, local religio-cultural frames increasingly untenable; diverse cities offered opportunities and limitations, which could only be surmounted through more universalistic frames.

A related, yet distinct consequence of iron technologies, economic expansion, and demographic booms was the transformation of warfare (Armstrong 2006). Assyria, for instance, was able to build an empire hitherto unimaginable, and it was also one of the first to likely employ “shock and awe” techniques like destroying an entire village and lining the outside walls with the skins of its former denizens (Bleibtreu 1991). This would have created existential horrors unmatched in previous epochs for both the masses and the learned; these

existential horrors would have demanded explanation, especially in light of each group's conception of the supernatural and/or the efficacy of their deity vis-à-vis all others. Mixed with the universalism necessary to appeal to a more diverse set of strata, themes of economic and social justice predicated on the growing visibility of inequality, and the existential fear produced by the horrors of iron wars, it seems reasonable to assume God or the supernatural could no longer reside here on Earth. If only as propaganda against foreign or local political elites, separating the political/secular world from the religious/supernatural world meant delegitimizing political actions, imagining a more hopeful world, and giving religio-cultural actors a resonant frame that could align the interests of several oppressed or semi-oppressed classes with the entrepreneur's goals.

A third force stems from the growth in societal size and political territory wrought by imperialism and/or improvements in transportation and communication technologies, which shrunk time and space. The consequences were freer movement for individuals and groups who did not have to worry as much about barbarians or other threats, which of course allowed for individuals like Buddha or Confucius to travel, craft universal messages, and create larger social networks of like-minded followers. It also, however, forced proud cultures like the Greeks to reconcile their supremacy versus a powerful and threatening Persian civilization claiming hegemony. Political ambitions nearly always run up against the limitations of available integrative mechanisms, determined partially by transportation and communication technologies (Mann 1986). Political innovations like vassalage, *corvée* labor, and deportation policies likely put pressure on peripheral groups like the Israelites or the Greeks to resist the center, which was physically and, more importantly, symbolically distant. Though China was different, bigger territories and weak mechanisms generate greater instability such as the Warring States, or the decentralized polities found in the Indian case. The latter case was unique in that "the principal thrust of the Buddhist critique was directed toward the actually-existing elements of the thought-world of early Brahmanism," (Pollock 2005:402) and not a typical political system; the Asokan reign, however, was a key catalyst for Brahmanic entrepreneurship.

All of these forces, and likely others, were driving religio-cultural innovation. In particular, you had entrepreneurs who were unable to wrest the monopoly over physical violence from their political counterparts, and thus their solution was psychological, symbolic, and populist. The theorized disjunction between the mundane and the transmundane, the "age of criticism," the strain towards historicity and agentality, and all of the other ways Axial Age scholars characterize symbolic change during that time period all stem from the confluence of

these various forces, and the broader constraints on innovation. Where force could not be legitimately marshaled, resonant frames that would draw the publics who were also oppressed towards these various religio-cultural entrepreneurs were carefully combined with mandates from the supranatural to act as checks or constraints on Earthly political power. These solutions, of course, were not without their risks as either the masses might not find them convincing or might lack the resources necessary to support entrepreneurial endeavors, while as in the case of the northern Israelites, forces from without worked to destroy entrepreneurial projects or co-opt them.

### The Meaning of Axiality

The lasting legacy of the Axial Age, in my estimation, was the creation—in varying degrees—of religious autonomy as a blueprint for future religious entrepreneurs. As they carved our relatively discrete spheres of religious action, exchange, and communication governed by *sacredness*, *truth*, and especially, *piety*, entrepreneurs enshrined reflexive, historicized, and agentic cultural systems in the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic spaces they reconfigured. Religious entrepreneurs were able to carve out greater religious autonomy in that the differences between their goals, values, actions, strategies, ideologies, and the like vis-à-vis other types became salient to themselves and, increasingly, other strata. For the first time, religious entrepreneurs conceptualized a “religious community [that] knew no boundaries [while] the politics . . . always did” (Pollock 2005:411). In part, the shrinking of physical and cultural space was predicated on the reconceptualization of what it meant a community could be, but also emerged out of the re-centering of religious reality from having to be tied solely to a physical space—e.g., the Jerusalem Temple—to being embedded in personal soteriologies and, hence, the person and/or the family.

This new autonomous sphere generated new generalized actions, exchanges, and communications that would require a medium or media different from *power* or *love/loyalty*—that is, a mode or modes of interaction, exchange, and communication that could distinguish authentic religious performances and rituals from other types; the social “currency” with which most interactions were ontologically secured; and the underlying meaning complex (and evaluative criteria) for writing, reading, interpreting, enacting, and applying discourse, texts, and intercourse. All religious domains with some autonomy tend to blend *sacredness* and *truth*, but during the Axial Age, religious entrepreneurs would add—as different from previous religious media—*piety*. In particular, it

was the latter medium that changed the “game,” and allowed religio-cultural entrepreneurs to find other bases of material and human resources apart from the polity or elite. Put another way, the “lens” through which religio-cultural entrepreneurs imposed their vision came through the themes of *sacredness/piety/truth*.<sup>10</sup> Any individual or group that sought one or more of these media—whether by learning a specialized institutional language and codes or acquiring the objectified forms—would have to undergo a phenomenological reorientation, as the pursuit and acquisition of media imply accepting the normative baseline of action, exchange, and communication lest social reality completely collapse (Luhmann 2012; Abrutyn 2013c). Thus, entrepreneurs imposed new normative/symbolic/organizational frameworks, and persuaded significant portions of the population that religious entrepreneurs had a legitimate claim to this authority over *sacredness* and *piety*. We see evidence of this in the emergence of new religious (1) actions—e.g., the prohibition of sacrifice; the feast of the Matzot; meditation or yoga; (2) exchanges—e.g., new generalized roles between religious officials/elites and laity; and (3) communication—e.g., the holy books and the various texts meant to interpret them were saturated in the symbolic meaning of *sacredness/piety/truth/supranatural*.

Further evidence can be found in the oft-times radical reconstruction of physical, temporal, social, and symbolic spaces. Consider the Israelite case, for example. Ezekiel (esp. 40–48)—whose book is considered to be a core Exilic priestly text—makes the argument that the new Temple is to be the physical and cognitive center after the Exile (cf. Blenkinsopp 1995:111ff.). This imagery was also added, around this time, to Numbers (2:1–34), where the wilderness camp analogously matches Ezekiel’s (and, thereby, the priestly class’) vision of the new Temple to-be-built. In addition, he provides clear instructions as to how the temple was to be built. Most notably, he stresses that *it is not to be built near any political buildings and it is not to be used by any political actors for political reasons!* This was a *radical* break from convention as temples generally were built near Palaces, acting as centralized storage facilities, economic centers of management, and, of course, sources of legitimacy (Liverani 2006). The monarchy, for several generations, would sit beside the religious sphere in a

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10 Two notes: The Greek’s notion of the sacred was most apparent in the conceptualization of the *polis* as the “sacred symbolic center” (Eliade 1959). And, one could very well make the argument that the Greek Axial Age, despite its perceived secularity, was in fact undeniably sacred as the supranatural pervaded the essence of Greek life (Raaflaub 2005).

balance previously not seen in the Near East; and, even during Greek and then Roman vassalage, the two would sit uneasily side-by-side.<sup>11</sup>

### *Important Caveats*

Some caveats should be added to this discussion to further flesh out the argument. First, the Axial Age was not a period in which the *completion* of religious autonomy occurred. Religious, or any form of sociocultural evolution, moves at different tempos (Abrutyn and Lawrence 2010). Some institutional projects are qualitatively punctuated in that radical change occurs in a relatively short time; others, like the theological work done after the second Temple was built (c. 516) to the time of its destruction was more gradual, with the Diaspora representing a threshold of cumulative and then seemingly radical change. Furthermore, “completion” or total autonomy is not a possibility, as any group that hermetically seals its institutional domain can be considered its own society.

Second, once the process of religious autonomy had begun in all four cases, it would have immediate and lasting consequences for other institutional domains. The strength of autonomy—as it increases or decreases—has ripple effects on other domains. These ripples played out in different ways based on several of the historical conditions discussed earlier, but overall, the evolution of religious autonomy had some general consequences worth pointing out. For one, political entrepreneurship was forever altered. The priest-king designation would gradually disappear; and religious entrepreneurs would become a serious stratum with which political entrepreneurs needed to always contend with. In addition, kinship which had been a taken for granted sphere of social reality, would likely become a much more self-conscious space as kinship entrepreneurs’ authority was now threatened by the polity, religious sphere, and the, very often, the coalitions these two autonomous spheres formed. Third, as religion, polity, and kinship became opposed to each others’ interests, new arenas and potential entrepreneurs began to appear: economic and legal entrepreneurs being the most prominent early on, but eventually scientific, educational, artistic, and medical entrepreneurs would often emerge within the interstices of two or more institutional spheres; these positions often allowed them to leverage their advantages into entrepreneurship and, eventually, autonomy.

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11 Even today, in Israel, personal status issues are dealt with by autonomous religious courts for each religious group.

### *Final Thoughts*

From an evolutionary-institutionalist's perspective, the Axial Age is a period of significant interest. It represented the first break from societies governed either by kinship logic, or those split between local kinship and regional political realities. Axial religions and autonomous religious domains offered a bridge between the two, (uneasily) balancing the particularism of local communities with the growing need for universal integrative mechanisms as polities grew demographically, territorially, and heterogeneously. In this sense, the Axial Age was unique, but several other epochs point to the evolution of autonomy in parallel cases—e.g., political evolution in Egypt, China, Mesopotamia 5,000 years ago; and, there are other moments in which other institutional domains became autonomous and new spheres of action, exchange, and communication developed or gained reflexivity, historicity, and agentality.

Consider, as an example, the Gregorian Reformation beginning in 1075 CE: some have made the argument that this period was epochal and, perhaps axial, because Pope Gregory VII and the great legal glosser Gratian invented the first codified legal system and the first army of legal entrepreneurs (Berman 1983; Abrutyn 2009)—that is, the stirrings of legal autonomy emerged from the unintended consequences of decisions made by Gregory to reform the Church and “fight” European polities not with force but with law. According to Assmann (2012:392), the axiality of the Axial Age came about when the texts become “living” entities in which the “commentary is . . . worked into the fabric of the texts . . . [and they become] full of glosses.” This certainly characterizes the legal innovations of Gratian and others like him. Furthermore, it is open for debate whether the evolution of legal autonomy or religious autonomy has had a greater impact on western civilization, and thus the Gregorian Reformation may be more Axial in Jaspers’ “sense” than the Axial Age itself. In either case, the theory posited above strives to elaborate and extend the discourse surrounding axiality rather than resolve any specific questions that may in fact be unanswerable.

One final comment is worth making. Much of the recent work on the Axial Age has correctly strove to eradicate the Christian-centric themes of Jaspers and the Eurocentric themes of the sociology of religion and the Axial Age. This includes both the careful and considerate examination of the Chinese and Indian cases, as well as the push for the inclusion of the Islamic case and, as Assmann forcefully reminds us, “pre-Axial” cases like the Egyptian and Mesopotamian. But, what is perhaps most curious, and vexing, is the complete disregard for the New World civilizations: Peru and Mesoamerica. Both had reached levels of political and cultural complexity akin to the Old World civilizations (Adams 1966; Patterson 1991; Joyce 2000), yet nary a word is spent

even speculating on whether they would have developed Axial Ages had the Europeans not colonized and effectively destroyed them. To be sure, I am no expert in the matter nor do I think it was a conscious decision to not include an expert from one or both of these political states in either recent edited volume, but I find it curious that these two civilizations have been generally omitted from the discourse. Perhaps it is because their Axial Ages were prevented from being realized by colonization? Mesoamerica, in particular, seems a likely candidate for axiality as it shared several characteristics as Mesopotamia (Adams 1966). Most crucial, in my estimation, was the “continuous” rise and fall of political centers as peripheral upstarts would occasionally become the “hegemon” (Sanders and Price 1968; Flannery 1972). Thus, the possibility that a peripheral region could elicit religious entrepreneurs seems very likely, though this matter would be best left to an expert in the field. In any case, there appears to be no reason to not bring Peru and Mesoamerica into the discussion if only to better understand why Axial Ages do not happen in some cases as opposed to others.

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