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SOCIETY AND MORALITY IN EURASIA

From Prehistory to the Present Day

Plenary Lectures

at the final conference of the
International Max Planck Research School
for the Anthropology, Archaeology and History of Eurasia

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Contents

Preface

The conference 'Society and Morality in Eurasia' was scheduled to take place in December 2020 in Halle (Saale). It had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and was eventually held as a hybrid event over three days in July 2021. The plenary lectures published in this booklet were delivered online in the same sequence in which they appear here in the evening of Wednesday 7th July. As the main organizer and host of the meeting, I am grateful to our invited speakers for allowing us to publish their contributions. They shared drafts with each other before and after the conference. For this publication, they were encouraged to refer to each other and to add a small number of notes and references, while retaining the informality of their oral presentations.

This conference was the final event of the Graduate School ANARCHIE, an acronym for *Anthropology, Archaeology and History of Eurasia*. Cooperation over the last decade with our partners at the Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg, has been an exciting and enriching experience for everyone in my department at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. I would like to thank all members of the Principal Faculty who have shared responsibility for the four cohorts of doctoral students we have admitted to this interdisciplinary school since 2012. Particular thanks are due to my fellow *Sprecher*, François Bertemes (Archaeology) and Michael G. Müller and Andreas Pečar (History), and to Sascha Roth, who has coordinated this publication, the conference to which the papers published here formed a prelude, and all ANARCHIE activities during the last six years.

Although the main products of our collaboration are specialized dissertations (some three dozen in all) in one of the three participating disciplines, we have continuously promoted cross-disciplinary conversations ranging widely in space and time. Our final conference, including the invitations to Alan Strathern, Stella Souvatzi and Joel Robbins, was conceived in this spirit.

Chris Hann, September 2021

Alan Strathern

The Eurasian Moral Revolution: Transcendentalism and its Implications

Perhaps today is the kind of occasion for which it may be appropriate to attempt a large-scale perspective. Indeed, I am going to suggest something of a grand narrative, even if that is a somewhat disreputable undertaking nowadays (at least in my discipline of history), and not easy to convey in the time available. I would normally start by addressing some of the methodological issues raised by taking a global comparative perspective.[1] However, we only have time for one clarification: I am not presenting some sort of evolutionary theory in which societies are bound to go through certain stages as they achieve specified levels of socio-economic development, and I'm not presenting a normative story here of some sort of whiggish arrow of progress.[2] This is not my intention at all.

Given that our conference is framed around 'Eurasia', the obvious question is: is it possible to consider Eurasia as a meaningful unit in terms of morality and religion at any point in history? From an extreme birds-eye perspective, I will say that, yes, it is, although I wish we had a term which put the accent more firmly on Asia, which is where the bulk of the action took place. But I will suggest, simply, that Eurasia is where the great traditions which came to dominate the moral sensibilities of the world over the past two thousand years were generated. I'm not talking about the modern moralities of secularism, socialism, capitalism, etc. Instead, I will refer to what I have called the transcendentalist traditions – the monotheistic creeds of Christianity, Islam, the Indic variants of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. I will also say something about Confucianism.

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[1] See Strathern 2019: 11–19, where I relate the approach taken here to a number of now dominant scholarly instincts, including the genealogical critique of concepts.

[2] I do not wish to suggest that there are no meaningful patterns connecting these ideological changes and socio-economic-political developments, but only to suggest that the cultural sphere is not reducible to these developments in a neatly schematic way.

So, it is already clear that I will be talking not so much about morality per se, but about how morality relates to the sphere of religion. In doing so I will be introducing some ideas and categories that are much more fully explained in my book, *Unearthly Powers*.[3] In particular I want to talk about two forms of religiosity: immanentism and transcendentalism. Indeed, I have suggested that one reason why the term 'religion' is so contested is because it strains to cover these two distinct phenomena.

As soon as our historical evidence becomes rich enough to document it, we find immanentism in existence – across the world, including Eurasia. Immanentism means that people imagined their world to be full of supernatural forces and beings with whom they must interact in order to flourish: ghosts, the spirit of the place, ancestors, gods, what Marshall Sahlins describes as 'metapersons'.[4] The universalism of this phenomenon seems to reflect a profound orientation to the logic of the social in the development of the human mind: anything that bears upon our well-being is instinctively understood in terms of motivated agency. In the book – I characterise it through ten features (see Appendix).

These metapersons are conceived as profoundly present or immanent in the world: consider ancient Greek gods residing on a mountain, or contemporary Central African spirit worlds which have their universities, airports, and governments. Repeatedly, scholars of these societies tell us that distinctions between society and cosmos, human and god, god and thing are blurred and porous; the nature/supernature distinction is irrelevant. The basic immanentist assumption is that achieving any worthwhile objective – to produce food, survive ill-health, become wealthy, give birth, wage war – depends on the intervention of supernatural forces and the metapersons that wield them.

It follows too that there is no sphere of religious values that may be differentiated from the values of society per se. What the narratives of immanentist religion embody are the normal ambitions of this world: heroism, fertility, order, peace, victory – much like the modern world in fact. But of course, these societies did not think of themselves as having 'a religion'; they

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[3] This piece represents a condensation of some main points from Strathern 2019: Chapter One, which should be consulted for references.

[4] Graeber and Sahlins 2017.

simply did not carve up the world that way; these are the religions with no names. Hence even using the term 'religion' is often considered problematic by scholars of such societies.

What of morality? Immanentist morality concerns the maintenance of successful communal living – except that the network of social relations extends into the realm of the metapersons, the ancestors and deities. Joel Robbins discusses what he refers to as the value orientation of 'relationalism'.[5] One way of defining immanentism is that it is simply relationalism extended to the sphere of metapersons: except that, even in cases where relational exchanges are conducted amongst visible humans in a relatively flat or egalitarian system, as in the case of the Urapmin, it would seem that metapersons may occupy a position of superiority or lordship.[6] That is to say that, according to Sahlins, these beings function as a kind of state before the state, for they demand tribute, lay down laws, and punish oath-breakers and miscreants.[7] But if such beings wield lordship, they do not do so in an idealised manner. From the Andes to Fiji, metapersons have been as capricious as fate or the weather. They may be terrifying, merciless, petty, jealous, deceitful. Indeed, relations with them can become rather transactional, even agonistic. These relations are not governed by canonical texts; instead they are borne on a perpetual stream of revelation.

I am not suggesting here that immanentist societies hold to a single moral regime – the category covers indescribable diversity over tens of thousands of years, different ecological niches, totally different political orders.

Rather, the category only really makes sense when contrasted with the transcendentalist traditions that began to take form roughly in the middle of the first millennium BCE, which has been referred to as the Axial Age. The idea of an Axial Age can be traced back to the 1860s but was crystallized by Karl Jaspers in the 1940s.[8] Now it has an important place within historical sociology (with the likes of Robert Bellah, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and I notice that Jürgen

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[5] Robbins 2004; see also Robbins, this publication.

[6] There is, I think, room for qualifying Sahlins' argument here by exploring the ways in which certain animist worldviews may function in a less hierarchical way. See, e.g., Costa and Fausto 2019: 195–226.

[7] See Graeber and Sahlins 2017, and Sahlins, forthcoming.

[8] Jaspers 1953; Halton 2014. Time precludes pausing to reflect on some of the methodological anxieties about using lines of thinking that stretch noticeably into the past.

Habermas has deployed it in his most recent work), so some of you may already be familiar with it and the debates that surround it.[9] But it is still rather alien in my field of history and also in anthropology. That is not to say that there aren't important scholars who have deployed it including Charles Taylor, Gananath Obeyesekere and Ernest Gellner, and Joel Robbins has taken inspiration from it for Anthropology.

The Axial idea emerged as a blatant an attempt to provincialize Europe, by placing Greek philosophy and Abrahamic monotheism within a much broader set of Asian cognitive revolutions. These arose in a circulatory zone taking in the old cores of urbanization and agriculture in West Asia, the Gangetic plain, the Yellow and Yangtze rivers region in China – extending across what Vic Lieberman has referred to as the 'exposed zone' of Eurasia.[10]

I do not see the attempt to identify an Age as the important contribution here: some of the traits we will be talking about have roots that reach much further back than the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE, and equally, some key transformations happen long after this period, not least the formation of Christianity and then Islam.[11] Nevertheless, many scholars have speculated about certain common conditions shaping these cores in the first millennium, which was indeed formative in certain crucial ways. In the eyes of the late David Graeber, the Axial traditions were a reaction against new forms of materialism and the assertion of coercive state power in the Iron Age, the rise of fiscal-military processes, the introduction of money, the use of slavery.[12] I mention this because it echoes Chris Hann's reference, drawing on Karl Polanyi, to the emergence of the disembedded economy.[13] We might even talk of the emergence of a disembedded state too. Surely, other important enabling conditions were

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[9] Eisenstadt 1986; Bellah 2011; Habermas 2019. For a recent important intervention also see Joas 2021.

[10] Lieberman 2009: 106–110. The 'exposed zone' extends laterally from Hungary to the Sea of Japan. It is a great circulatory zone in which many of the earliest developments in agriculture, urbanization and state building took place in prehistory, but Lieberman principally refers to the way the terrain and climate here later allowed huge Inner Asian cavalry armies to be deployed to devastating effect. Cf Hann 2016: 2 on the Eurasian macro-region.

[11] The Egyptologist Jan Assmann (e.g. Assmann, forthcoming) sees certain features anticipated in Ancient Egypt but ends up underlining the distinctive watershed of the Axial moment in the form of the 'Mosaic distinction'.

[12] Graeber 2011.

[13] Hann 2015: 317; Hann 2016. Both pieces also make use of Axial Age theory.

the long-term implications of literacy (albeit not, apparently, in Ancient India), the rise of teachers who were neither priests nor officials, and quite rapid socio-economic change.[14] These are mentioned here for the way they can be linked with what I take to be the definitive cognitive spur to Axiality, which is a sudden surge of relativism: a sense in which the givenness of the status quo is stripped away, and reflexivity and competitive debate become the order of the day. For whatever reason, traditional forms of religion and conceptions of human flourishing came under great strain in this environment. In China, Greece and India especially, a degree of scepticism about metapersons arose, their role, their significance. Why do we sacrifice to them? Do they need our meat? If they fight battles for us, can they be wounded? So, in all cases, the logic of immanentism was called into question, and into the acid bath went also any kind of merely received, local morality.

Out of this ferment emerged fundamental cultural structures that persist to this day: Confucianism and Daoism in China; the philosophical tradition in Greece; Buddhism, Jainism and forms of Hinduism in India; monotheism in West Asia. Hence the 'axial' turn. But what could be more radically divergent than these traditions?! Surely, the task of scholarship is to focus on their incommensurability? But from a global perspective, set against the backdrop of immanentism, we may see that the monotheistic and Indic variants in particular share a number of features – in fact, fifteen of them – which I have specified to define Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism divides reality into two dimensions: a mundane sphere, inherently unsatisfactory, and a sacred dimension that was, in one sense at least, literally ineffable. In Buddhism this is nirvana. The Buddha of the Pali canon would not define nirvana, whether it was existence, non-existence, both of these things or neither of them. The followers of such traditions yearn to attain this dimension: this is salvation, and it becomes the highest end of religious activity. In this vision, suffering in this life may even be a marker of spiritual attainment.

The sphere of the sacred, is now characterised by absolute good, and religion becomes the search for the good – as something quite distinct from mere human flourishing. And indeed, this involves the arrival of explicit, codified morality, such as the Ten Commandments or the Five Precepts of Buddhism, which was

[14] See also Wittrock 2015: 107–108.

based on some version of the golden rule, and tied to the project of salvation and laid out in texts. These moralities are universal, encompassing all humans – or all living beings – and they are idealised to the point of utopianism, almost at war with human nature. Asceticism – monastics, mendicants and hermits – arrives as an attempt to live out this transcendence of human nature.

All this, in turn, entails an entirely new valuation of interiority, of the self – as something explored in prayer or meditation, for example. There is a certain shift of activity here from the communal to the individual-cum universal. As Stella Souvatzi argues, kinship is everywhere a foundation stone of social organisation.[15] But in the transcendentalist imagination, even kinship may be castigated: as when Jesus announces

> If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

Or think of the Buddha in Vessantara Jataka, narrating his past life as a king who had given away not only his treasures and his kingdom, but his children too.

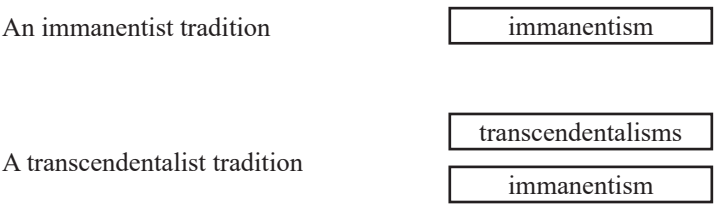
If ritual is the characteristic activity of the immanentist mode (and sacrifice its most typical form), then ethics is the characteristic activity of the transcendentalist mode (and self-sacrifice the most typical form). Similarly to the history of the 'self', or 'religion', the cluster of concepts around 'truth' and 'belief' is sometimes held to be distinctively European or monotheistic or Enlightenment in origin. But all the Axial Age revolutions produce what Ernest Gellner referred to as 'offensive' ideologies.[16] That is to say, they are predicated on the need to attack alternative visions of reality: they assert the Truth rather than merely knowledge; they were formed around a single primary point of revelation associated with a historical figure; that revelation was set down in textual form. This partially closed canonization of teachings is central to many of the features mentioned here. All these traditions therefore produce a class of literate intellectuals – a 'clerisy' – who act as its guardians and interpreters. They formed institutions – Sangha, Church, Ulema – with tremendous organisational

[15] Souvatzi 2017; see also Souvatzi, this publication.

[16] Gellner 1979: 117–132.

power, and wielding a moral authority that was quite distinct from that of the state.

I apologize that all this is so massively condensed. However, one thing I would like to stress: the vision of transcendentalism I have outlined looks like no religious tradition that has ever existed. That is because it *always* forms an amalgam with immanentism. But note: the reverse is not true. Immanentism has existed untroubled by transcendentalism for most of human history. This can be illustrated in a simple diagram:



Transcendentalisms are bound up with immanentism at their inception: consider the miracles of Jesus, deplored by some contemporaries as a miracle worker dealing in superstition. We might even remark on the way his story offers a strange recapitulation of the logic of human sacrifice – although it is ultimately more significant that His is the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. But equally, the transcendentalist traditions are *also* subsequently subject to many historical processes of immanentization. The constant search to access supernatural power to help the crops grow, or heal the sick, meant that new ritual forms were constantly generated. This affected the sphere of morality too. Saints functioned as metapersons associated with discrete areas of immanent assistance. They became so strongly associated with transactional relationism that they could come to be treated as rather nonethical beings. They might be tried, punished, or attacked by devotees frustrated at their refusal to protect them from disease or yield some other such boon. Or think of the fate of the Buddha, who scorned magic in the Brahamajala Sutta, while after his death his relics were granted magical powers that could be carried into battle.

All kinds of paradoxes are set off once these traditions make their journey from the margins to the centre ground of any society. They must come to fulfil the Durkheimian functions that all societies demand of their central cult: far from repudiating kinship or political authority, they must become their fundamental legitimator. And so on. The more powerful the moral authority of the otherworldly message of the monastery, the more patronage they acquire, and therefore the more their worldly wealth and power grows.

And yet these processes in turn give rise to countervailing forms of re-transcendentalization, or more simply 'reform'. In Buddhism, for example, where monastic orders sought to purify the Pali canon – as in thirteenth century Sri Lanka.[17] And, yes, in Christianity, all the myriad movements of reform over the centuries, and most obviously the Reformation itself – which, whatever else it was, was surely, an attempt to reassert the defining features of transcendentalism, to reanimate an Augustinian vision of the awesome otherness of God, and to limit the multiplying vehicles of immanent power.

Thus, these concepts are not static categories but are means for understanding historical change. For example, it is easy to see that the form of Christianity that arrives amongst Joel Robbin's Urapmin, must be considered a very different kind of transcendentalist-immanentist amalgam to that we can see in the Catholicism which arrived in the Kongo at the end of the fifteenth century.[18] It seems to me that this model helps cope with many generations of criticism of cognate theoretical perspectives. It is important to note that if we find these dynamics in all transcendentalist traditions, it is also *only* in those traditions – and that fact only becomes significant once history truly globalizes, and we have to take into account places like Fiji and Benin as well as France and Beijing. Here I would like to emphasise that it is only by stepping outside of Eurasia, and truly getting to grips with the global perspective, that we can even begin to hypothesise about what if anything ever made Eurasia distinct.

In *Unearthly Powers,* I used Buddhism and Christianity and sometimes Islam to illustrate transcendentalism, leaving Hinduism and Confucianism for consideration in a forthcoming companion volume.[19] Indeed, it is only recently,

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[17] Gornall 2020.

[18] Discussed in Strathern, forthcoming b. On Christianity as at once generalizable at one level and differentiated at another, note Hann 2014.

[19] Strathern, forthcoming b.

especially through dialogue with Michael Puett, that it has become clear to me how firmly Ancient China belongs in the Axial paradigm, albeit in a highly distinctive way.[20] We lack the time to explore this tonight, but perhaps we can at least note that Confucianism is not a classic transcendentalist tradition, for it is not oriented to an otherworldly salvation. Yet it did entail an ethicization of relations with the divine, and a certain sense in which the sacrificial gift-exchange logic of ritual was sidelined for an understanding of it as a force for remaking the human subject. Enduring legacies persist to the present day: both the way in which the state has retained a focus of idealization and its paranoia about salvation religion.

Indeed, a major point of my model is to relate all this to the sphere of politics, to different ways of sacralising rulers for example, and ultimately I want to put these concepts to work in helping explain patterns of change. Let me touch, very briefly, on two.

Firstly, human sacrifice has been found across the world, including in parts of Eurasia, if we think only of the sacrificial pits of Shang China. Why was it repeatedly invented in unconnected regions of the world? Because it reflects a core logic of immanentism. If sacrifice is the exchange mechanism for the economy of life force – the giving of life in order to obtain life – then it follows that the more precious the gift the more powerful the return. Yet for the Axial traditions, by contrast, human sacrifice is simply unthinkable, and so we find that long before the sixteenth century, it died out in Eurasia.

In places where these Old World traditions had not spread, the practice endured. Take the Aztecs – James Maffie's account of Aztec thought is one of the most striking elaborations of pure immanence that I have come across.[21] When the Spanish arrived into the Aztec empire in 1519, they found its capital of Tenochtitlan to be larger than Madrid, as well as radiantly attractive, clean, civilized, and orderly. And yet at its heart was the Templo Mayor, dedicated to a god of war and a god of fertility, who were served through the regular and climactic act of ritual homicide. The Aztecs were part of a far larger set of cultures in the Americas for whom the shedding of blood was necessary to nourish the gods. I should say that ritual homicide is not a general feature of

[20] Puett, forthcoming.

[21] Maffie 2014.

immanentism – it belongs only to a subset, but that subset is very dispersed. It could also be found at this time in some parts of Africa such as Benin, and across the Polynesian islands – societies characterised by very different forms of political complexity.

This should illustrate the point I made at the start: I am not setting up a simple evolutionary process. Transcendentalism is not a stage of history that all societies must funnel through once they attain a certain level of urbanisation or centralisation. Nor am I presenting it as a superior stage of ethics, a gift of Eurasia to the world. Which do you prefer – Mexican warriors taking captives for sacrifice who would otherwise have died on the battlefield, or Spanish conquistadors slaying much larger numbers with a sword in one hand and a bible in the other? The Spanish brought with them a kind of violence issuing from their transcendentalist offensiveness – their sole possession of the Truth – that monotheism took to its logical conclusion.[22] Once we accept the basic immanentist premise that our flourishing lies in the hands of metapersons engaged in a continual cycle of relational exchange, then the morality of it is not obscure at all. But we can see that immanentist religiosity wreaks havoc among notions of the 'holy' or 'sacred' fashioned by Eurasian traditions such as Christianity and Buddhism. Life and death are two sides of the same coin here: immanentism allows these truths to be looked at square in the face.

A second pattern: these Eurasian traditions came to global domination. We might immediately imagine them simply piggy-backing on empire. Yes – but their spread was by no means only down to Spanish steel or the Maxim gun. It also happened due to the voluntary conversion of rulers and subjects – this is how Rome and Europe had been converted to Christianity in the early first millennium, and how the Pacific converted in the late second. These products of the Asian/ Eurasian settled cores came to rewrite the consciousness of the world. It was the monotheistic forms that really took advantage, of course, and thus we now find many of their most fervent adherents outside Eurasia, as Joel Robbins illustrates. Whereas in Asia, it is more the refusal of Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism to succumb to monotheism that is more striking. One way we can deploy the concepts suggested here is simply to reveal this pattern: pure immanentism died out, while transcendentalism – or, more

[22] Strathern, forthcoming a.

precisely, the transcendentalist-immanentist hybrids – won out, and in the modern world, their only real challengers are secular ideologies that disavow religion altogether.

Appendix[23]

Immanentism is characterised by:

(1) The rampant generation of metapersons,
(2) A monistic cosmology,
(3) An undifferentiated afterlife,
(4) A focus on power,
(5) An unsystematised and community-focussed morality,
(6) Amoral metapersons,
(7) An empirical understanding of the function of ritual,
(8) The free incorporation of new revelation,
(9) No equivalent to the concept of religious identity
(10) Translatability or de facto universalism.

Transcendentalism is characterised by:

(1) An ontological division between transcendent and mundane spheres,
(2) An orientation towards the objective of salvation,
(3) An ethicization of values and metapersons,
(4) Otherworldly or utopian values,
(5) An emphasis on individual interiority,
(6) Ideological 'offensiveness',
(7) Attempts to control and textualize revelation,
(8) Intellectualization,
(9) Self-conscious identity formation,
(10) Universalist reach and proselytising tendencies,
(11) The field of metapersons is monopolised or inferiorised.
(12) The deprecation of magic,
(13) The development of autonomous clerisies,
(14) Emergence outside the state
(15) The dynamic of reform

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[23] The following is drawn from Strathern 2019, Chapter One.

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Stella Souvatzi

Morality, Egalitarianism and Social Complexity in the Early Farming Societies

Mainstream archaeological theory may place too much emphasis on self-interest, divisions and antagonism as motivating history and change, privileging social asymmetry. Equally problematic is the Eurocentric view of history, deriving from the grand models of social evolution, as a teleological, linear, cumulative and inevitable 'progress' towards hierarchization.[1] Consequently, as I have argued elsewhere, many archaeological narratives equate complexity with hierarchy, take hierarchy as the chief mechanism driving social integration, and contrast complexity with simplicity.[2] This way of thinking presumes a fundamentally amoral human essence that leaves little space for altruism, solidarity, emotion and ethical notions limiting self-interest. It also fails to explain behaviour that does not conform to some straightforward economic logic. At the same time, recent cross-disciplinary interest in prehistoric religion often aims to explain features such as co-operative behaviour or the development of hierarchy. This phenomenon causes further confusion, not least because (as Alan Strathern has already reminded us this evening) the term 'religion' is poorly and very variously defined.

I shall argue that the idea of a moral community is necessary to counter both the ego-centred nature of much archaeological reconstruction and the emphasis placed by others on religious ideals of transcendence. We need a firmer grasp of what might have been expected of groupings and individuals who belonged to such a moral community. How does the past appear if we attempt to bring morality into it without resorting either to idealised perceptions of 'simple'

[1] These points are discussed in detail in Souvatzi et al. 2018.

[2] See Souvatzi 2007.

egalitarian societies or to the imposition of modern Western notions, such as viewing religious ideology as a prerequisite for building reciprocity? What were the understandings, relationships, ideologies and institutions which created and maintained social cohesion for remarkably long periods? If morality is viewed not as some idealised notion but as 'an essential aspect of the actors' motive',[3] we may begin to problematise its effects on economic and social organisation. I shall consider some of the areas in which the presence of such forces can be detected, using empirical data from Neolithic Greece (ca. 6600–3300 BCE) and Turkey (ca. 10000–6000 BCE).

Neolithic societies in Greece and Turkey – and broadly in the whole of Europe and southwest Asia – continually confront us with social choices that do not fit neatly into the models I have mentioned. For example, they show many social and economic elements that are thought to characterise only later periods and to be as integral components of complexity, concomitant with political centralisation and hierarchical organisation. These include: agricultural diversification and intensity; large, permanently co-resident and enduring communities, especially the mega-sites of south-western Asia or of central and eastern Europe, functioning within regional or 'networked super-communities';[4] settlement agglomeration and large-scale architecture; and (part-time) craft specialisation and long-distance exchange.

Let us consider some examples:

In Turkey, the large anthropogenic mounds (or 'tells') of Aşikli Höyük (8400–7400 BCE) and Çatalhöyük (7100–5500 BCE) exemplify the merging of previously independent villages into a single large nucleated settlement. In each site discrete social groups, probably from the earlier villages, occupy different segments, identified as 'clustered neighbourhoods'.[5] At Çatalhöyük the two large habitation mounds show together a continuous occupation from the 8th to the 6th millennium BCE. The East mound alone (7100–6000 BCE) has revealed 18 main levels of successive habitation, each with a dense layout of mudbrick houses, and a population estimated to be between 5.000 and 8.000 people. Building size, shape and interior organisation were remarkably standardised

[3] Bloch 1973: 75.

[4] See Watkins 2019: 229.

[5] Düring 2011: 58–68.

and remained largely unchanged over time, indicating commitment to space, sociality and community standards. There is no evidence of social inequality or centralised power, or even social distinctions based on gender or age. This was a highly successful society that flourished maintaining egalitarianism for almost two thousand years.

In Greece, part-time craft-specialisation developed from the beginnings of the Neolithic in several material classes, including decorated pottery, chipped stone tools and shell and stone ornaments. There is no sign that special status was attached to these different crafts and craftspeople.

Large-scale architecture, agriculture, and collective rituals would also have involved different degrees of specialised knowledge and supra-household organisation. For instance, the construction of stone enclosures, perimetric ditches, habitation terraces and retaining walls would have required a network of relationships, exchanges and obligations at the wider corporate group level. In addition, everywhere and throughout the Neolithic there was a constant flow of goods and connections between people, things, places and ideas in overlapping exchange systems over wide geographical areas – for example, of obsidian from the Aegean island of Melos, which involved seafaring, and of *Spondylus* shell ornaments from the Aegean Sea, which reached as far as central Europe.

All this complexity provided a great potential for economic and social tensions – e.g. through the potentially conflicting interests of the various producing and exchanging groups. Yet, there is no consistent evidence of institutionalised or hereditary hierarchies, centralisation or social differentiation either within or between communities throughout the Neolithic. How were individuals, groups and communities held together? How did they succeed in resolving tensions, achieve cohesion and remain in coexistence for such remarkably long periods? Who was given the authority to mobilise and allocate labour, and to exert a degree of communal control over individual rights to production and distribution? What conditions, institutions, and beliefs prompted individuals to transcend their own interests in favour of a collective goal?

The most plausible answer to all these questions is kinship, in both its political and moral dimension.[6] In essentially egalitarian and non-state societies,

[6] For more detail see Souvatzi 2017.

kinship provides the potential and the motives for craft-specialisation, for multiple modes of production and (re)distribution, and for networks of alliance and exchange. Among non-hierarchical groups, inter- and intracommunity specialisations are often the basis for establishing inter- and intragroup alliance, and behaviours and exchanges are constantly in flux. The role of kinship in cooperation and delayed-return is central to the social integration and cohesion evidenced in Neolithic communities. I argue that in the long term, the presence of kinship bonds would have further reinforced heterarchical social ties.

Kinship has clear spatial and material dimensions that make it particularly appropriate for archaeological identification. Indeed, many Neolithic settlements, particularly the larger ones or the 'tells' point to unilineal descent groups (although spatial segmentation in some of them may just as well be based on affinity). For example, in Greece, the mound of Dimini shows both circular organisation and consistent spatial segmentation: multiple stone concentric enclosures constructed at different levels, up to five metres higher than the ground surface, surround and divide habitation terraces around a large central courtyard. Four main radial passages further divide space into symmetrical segments, made up of individual households. This layout conforms to the indications for unilineal descent groups cross-culturally. The central courtyard would have served simultaneously for assemblies of the community and rituals, materializing an ideology of social cohesion. Significantly, despite the outwards expansion of the settlement over the years, its concentric layout remained unaltered and its central ancestral space unbuilt. In this sense, the whole layout of the settlement can be interpreted as a moral plan and a guide for proper social behaviour. Similarly, at Aktopraklık in Turkey, a ring of rectangular mudbrick dwellings adjacent to each other show a uniform size, construction, interior arrangements and contents. They surround a central courtyard, which contained large communal ovens and human burials. Evidence for ditches and further rings of dwellings may suggest spatial segmentation, a concentric layout and multiple lineages.

At Aşikli Höyük and Çatalhöyük the so-called 'clustered neighbourhoods' may correspond to multi-lineage settlements. At Çatalhöyük the uneven distribution between houses of the nearly 400 human skeletons found buried under the floors indicates that certain buildings served as burial locations for multiple individuals. The frequent dismemberment of the human body and the

movement and manipulation of body parts around the site suggests that the burials constituted a process of constant shaping and re-shaping of identities.

The Neolithic kinship-based economy may have also extended to corporate ownership of land and resources, especially in the tells, whose formation and maintenance over time required large-scale collective enterprise.[7] In non-capitalist societies, distinct social units rarely have authority over the totality of common land, which is instead often regulated through the manipulation of kinship relationships. Communal ownership provides the secure frame for production.

I must make it clear that I am not advocating a romanticized notion of kinship as a frame of stability and equality. But kinship is a cornerstone of the moral economy, and the moral economy is dialectically interwoven with the political economy in that it can be developed precisely to augment the viability and security of its constituent groups. As Maurice Bloch pointed out, 'the crucial effect of morality is long term reciprocity and the long term effect is achieved because it is not reciprocity which is the motive, but morality.'[8] The growth of long-term dependencies and the production and pooling of subsistence surplus necessary for delayed-return economic systems such as those of the Neolithic societies rely more on the creation of a social obligation than on immediate return or reward.

Yet, for reasons that I cannot fathom, the topic of kinship is neglected in prehistoric archaeology, while there has been an increase of interest in religion. The latter was originally developed outside archaeology, is based on historical and ethnographic case-studies and usually operates within a framework that relates religiosity to cultural and social evolution (even though Alan Strathern has rejected that connection in his lecture this evening). It is assumed that there is a correlation between scale and the beliefs and practices we gloss as religion. Larger societies possess more complex and more demanding religious beliefs and practices. Larger societies are hierarchical.

Cross-cultural analysis of historical and contemporary cultures by anthropologists, sociologists, theologians and philosophers has influenced some recent prehistorical enquiries into the role and form of religion in the

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[7] Souvatzi 2020.

[8] Bloch 1973: 76.

Neolithic societies of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. An important precursor of these extrapolations was the French prehistorian Jacques Cauvin who, about 30 years ago, aiming to counteract the tendency to attribute social change to the ecology and environment, argued that the Neolithic of the Levant saw 'the birth of the gods'.[9]

At Çatalhöyük, a multi-disciplinary programme entitled *The Primary Role of Religion in the Origin of Settled Life*, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, has led to three collective volumes, the first of which opens with the suggestion that religiosity and spirituality were major factors driving the emergence of complex society.[10] It is also argued that neolithization, this most crucial process in human history, is driven by a shift from an imagistic to a doctrinal mode of religiosity, in the terminology of Harvey Whitehouse. This model is based on Whitehouse's ethnographic fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. It focuses on the psychological effect of rituals: the imagistic mode involves low frequency but high arousal rituals and is associated with small-scale societies, while doctrinal religiosity involves high frequency and low arousal rituals and is typical of large-scale, complex and hierarchical societies (in comparison, Alan Strathern's model of immanentism and transcendentalism is much more fluid). Ian Hodder seems to think that the beginnings of the doctrinal mode can be seen in changes in rituals and in agricultural and social intensity that took place in the late phase of occupation of Çatalhöyük.[11]

The site of Göbekli Tepe in southeast Turkey or upper Mesopotamia, dated to the transition from hunter-gathering to farming societies in the Near East (10th–9th millennium BCE), has attracted religious interpretations. It is best known for its series of monumental enclosures (between 10 and 30 metres in diameter) made of locally quarried T-shaped monoliths decorated with images of wild animals and interconnected by stone walls or benches. In the middle of each enclosure stood pairs of even larger monoliths (as tall as 5.50 metres and as heavy as 20 tons), sometimes bearing anthropomorphic features such as arms, hands, garments and pendants. The excavator, the late Klaus Schmidt, suggested that the enclosures were the world's first temples. The central

[9] Cauvin 2000 [1994].

[10] Hodder 2010: 1, 2.

[11] Whitehouse and Hodder 2010.

monoliths were representations of gods or supernatural agents and the site served as a mountain sanctuary for hunter-gatherer communities.[12] Despite important archaeological criticisms of the use of concepts and analogies from a range of much later contexts,[13] the temple narrative has been very widely disseminated, both in academic discourse and in public imagination. More recently, it has also been suggested that Göbekli Tepe shows a combination of imagistic and doctrinal rituals that indicates the origins of an institutionalised religion.[14] Further research at the site has provided evidence for the existence of domestic buildings and year-round settlement.[15]

Although the arguments about Neolithic religion are attractive to many, they are essentially speculative. It is not that new facts have imposed a changed interpretation of the past. Rather, this discourse represents a shift towards a new idealism, as opposed to a (historical) materialist conceptualisation of the Neolithization process, under the influence of postmodernist thinking. This has several implications. The emphasis on religion and belief as the driving factor of domestication or Neolithization betrays a bias in the study of social dynamics that is just as one-sided as earlier economistic and adaptationist interpretations. The interest in religious explanations, based on the assumption of a nexus between agricultural intensification, population growth and social tensions, may be another version of ideological, sociological and moral individualism in archaeological theory. It assumes an absence or a weakening of social institutions, such that religion is called upon to act as some kind of regulator and to explain co-operative behaviour and collective identities. It also brings to the forefront deeply embedded concepts of a uniform and mono-directional trajectory towards Neolithic 'achievement' involving the gradual adoption of typical features (such as specific kinds of religious beliefs and practices). The most serious theoretical problem with this new idealism is that in many prehistoric studies religion begins as a foregone conclusion. This entails, among other things, the risk of suggesting that 'important' material culture reflects religious rather than secular ideology.

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[12] Schmidt 2012.

[13] Bernbeck 2013; Watkins 2019.

[14] Dietrich et al. 2019.

[15] Clare 2020.

In fact, however, the Neolithic way of life is a non-linear phenomenon, whose very complexity and diversity cannot be obscured by later historical processes of homogenisation. Neolithic societies have no clear parallel in the ethnographic assemblages of the religion literature. Were they not large enough to be considered large-scale? Or is the existence of social hierarchy the critical factor that produces complexity or religion? Can we really extrapolate from a range of later prehistoric and historical contexts that lack continuity with the earlier prehistoric millennia? There is a lack of direct continuity even between the earlier and the later Neolithic, at least in south-western Asia, where later Neolithic periods are characterised by a break in architectural traditions and by changes in the images or iconography.[16]

I believe that we need to take a step back and consider the possibility of a radically different configuration of imagined spheres of life in the deep past. Humans developed cooperative behaviour and ideas of indirect reciprocity as early as the Palaeolithic. This enabled them to build larger moral communities in the Neolithic, extending the idea of kin into fictive or ritual kinship to create stronger forms of bonding within and among large settled populations. The role of kinship in the Neolithic is best understood in terms of the coordination of social and economic relationships, the promotion of intensive social interaction, and the strengthening of social cohesion. Indeed, the formation and maintenance of social relationships and networks of interaction seems to have been a major aim in Neolithic social organisation, analogous perhaps to the 'relationalism' that Joel Robbins identifies in his field research among the Urapmin.[17]

I suggest that these processes took place within an ethos of egalitarianism through the creation of complex social interrelationships. The ideology of equality was grounded not on transcendence but on the new social and material realities. Neolithic communities were held together by powerful, intensive, sophisticated practices revolving around architecture, economy, ritual, burial and the sharing and exchange of things and ideas, and by integrative mechanisms which helped maintained egalitarianism. Although separate social units provided the framework for the organisation of labour, their economic importance seems to have been downplayed in favour of their moral, collective importance.

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[16] See for example Watkins 2019: 231–232.

[17] Robbins 2004; see also Robbins, this publication.

For instance, durable, monumental or large-scale architecture can be understood as such a social mechanism. One aspect that has not received sustained attention is the very process of construction. I have suggested elsewhere that it might be this process, rather than merely the completed architectural form, that was crucial. The construction process itself was the ritual.[18] All the evidence suggests that collective architectural works, including Göbekli Tepe, constituted not a unitary act but a continuous process of building, maintenance, and modification events, implying a constant desire to rework and restructure the material and social world. In this way, construction becomes a potent form of social or ritual exchange between different groups through time, as well as a material mnemonic of these transactions and thus a form of history. That such processes were associated with cosmological ideas is likely. However, construction could well have served primarily as a means for creating the material conditions under which social groups could come together and negotiate their differences. At Göbekli Tepe, for instance, current attempts to interpret the site in new light as a place used for the promotion of inter-community solidarity and the material documentation of shared history or mythology and identity may be more convincing than the religious or temple narrative.[19] Furthermore, in essentially egalitarian societies, the construction of enclosures and structured site-layouts can be understood not as a narrowing of economic property rights but as the material representation of lines of descent and the spatial mapping of group genealogies.

In conclusion, we need to distinguish complexity from hierarchy, as well as morality from religious ideology and transcendence. Conflation of these concepts limits our understanding of the character and diversity of the social relations, identities and processes created by different socio-historical circumstances. While idealised perceptions of 'simple' egalitarian societies will not stand up to any in-depth social analysis, it is equally illusory to believe that we can explain social action by imposing our own system of hierarchies, priorities and beliefs on prehistoric societies. Instead, we can use the unexpected social patterns of Neolithic societies to trace different ontologies and forms of being. The early farming communities as a whole seem to have a remarkably long and successful

[18] See Souvatzi 2008: 227, 228.

[19] See Clare et al. 2019.

history of resistance to linear, cumulative processes of hierarchisation, despite showing elements of social and economic organisation conventionally thought to characterise later periods. Egalitarianism and simplicity are not synonymous. It is neither simple nor easy ‘to defend equality’ over such geographical and temporal scales.[20]

[20] I borrow this phrase from Trigger (1990: 145).

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Joel Robbins

When Did It Become Hard to Be Good? Axial Dynamics and the Problem of the Moral Self

In preparing my contribution for this conference, I had to ask myself a question that may also have occurred to the audience: why am I contributing to this project? I'm going to speak about the Urapmin, a language group of about 400 people living in the far western highlands of Papua New Guinea. When I worked with them in the early 1990s, the Urapmin had almost no participation in the market economy and relatively little in Papua New Guinea's modern political order. They had no electricity, airstrip, or vehicular roads connecting them to anywhere in what was widely understood to be the country's least developed province. Given these facts, the Urapmin would seem ill-prepared to crash a party devoted to celebrating the potential insights about morality and history that follow from taking the contemporary and historical societies of Eurasia to be participants in what we might call a single, complex 'macro-civilization'. At best, I would appear to have to engage in a pretty David and Goliath style of comparison to even get them in the door, and at worst I'd come off as the fool who brings oranges to an apple festival. It is true that I could link to Stella Souvatzi's account of the Neolithic societies of Eurasia[1] by asserting that the Urapmin could have something to say about equality as a principle of social organisation.[2] But for reasons that will shortly become clear, I'm going to try to sneak them into this discussion through a different entrance, the one marked 'axial age'.

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[1] Souvatzi 2007; see also Souvatzi, this publication.

[2] See Robbins 1994.

The axial age is 'a Eurasian-centric paradigm'.[3] A macro-theory for a macro-civilization, in its full pomp the axial age theory suggests that between roughly the eighth and the third centuries BCE, a set of similar and momentous cultural and social changes occurred in a number of Eurasian societies, including those of Ancient Israel, Ancient Greece, early Imperial China and in the Hindu and Buddhist civilizations. Christian and Muslim civilizations are often added to this list as latecomers that arose outside the axial 'age' proper but built on the transformations that originated in the axial period.[4] These transformations, which axial age theorists hold to have given birth to what are today generally classed as the main world religions as well as the western philosophical tradition, all involved a stepping back from taken for granted ideas about the social order and the cosmos in which it is set. The axial age was, as Arnaldo Momigliano influentially put it, an 'age of criticism' that was also, quoting Benjamin Schwartz's equally prominent formulation, an 'age of transcendence'.[5] If we put the two together, we can think of axial societies as ones in which people begin to criticise the worlds in which they live from the point of view of other worlds outside of or beyond them. In absurdly compressed form, the claim that roughly 2.500 years ago this turn to transcendent criticism led to major changes in how Eurasian societies were organized and how people lived in them constitutes the axial age argument as it runs from its founding figure Karl Jaspers[6] to its most prominent recent proponents such as Robert Bellah.[7]

Part of what makes the axial age argument at once exciting but also, for many, a little suspect in its grand claims is that it is actually composed of two rather distinct sub-arguments. The first is a spatio-temporal historical argument claiming that the initial axial 'breakthroughs' happened during a particular time period, albeit a long one, and in a specific place – Eurasia. The second is a typological argument, asserting that there are major social and cultural differences between pre-axial or 'traditional' societies and those anywhere in the world that have experienced axial-type transformations at any time. The spatio-temporal argument is subject to an immense amount of historical

[3] Boy and Torpey 2013: 248. Chris Hann (2016) has also made this point.

[4] Eisenstadt 1982: 294. See also Strathern, this publication.

[5] Momigliano 1975: 9; Schwartz 1975: 1.

[6] Jaspers 1953.

[7] Bellah 2011; see also Bellah and Joas (eds.). 2012.

questioning, and it is here that suspicions proliferate. But the typological argument is less vulnerable to such critique – it only proposes that there are meaningful differences between societies that use a transcendent point of view as a vantage from which to critically view their naturalised, 'traditional' ways of life and those that do not. Setting temporal and geographic concerns aside, as I must as an Urapmin ethnographer among the Eurasianists, it is the typological path I want to follow here to find a place for the Urapmin in our conversation.

Shmuel Eisenstadt is perhaps the key figure in the axial age discussion who has made a shift from putting forward historical claims about an 'age' to making social theoretical ones about different 'types of social order'.[8] Before moving on to my own arguments, it will be useful briefly to rephrase how I have already described the changes that mark axial age societies in Eisenstadt's own terms. For him, the revolutions of the axial age were distinctive for leading to 'the emergence, conceptualization and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders.'[9] It was this tension, he goes on to say, that in one form or another all of the axial age civilizations shared. In all of them, people perceived 'a sharp disjunction between the mundane and the transmundane', and they stressed 'the existence of a higher transcendental moral or metaphysical order which is beyond any given this- or other-worldly reality.'[10] Eisenstadt does acknowledge that 'the transmundane order has, in all human societies, been perceived as somewhat different, usually higher and stronger, than the mundane one.'[11] But he goes on to argue that in traditional societies 'this higher world has been symbolically structured according to principles very similar to those of the mundane or lower one.'[12] In some respects that I will take up near the end of my talk, the distinction Eisenstadt is making here between 'pre-axial' and 'axial' societies is similar to the one Alan Strathern has drawn between 'immanentist' societies in which gods and ancestors are a lot like other people and 'transcendental' ones in which deities and ultimate realities are incalculably more powerful, knowledgeable, and perfect than other

[8] Boy and Torpey 2013: 253.

[9] Eisenstadt 1982: 294.

[10] Eisenstadt 1982: 296.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

people and the earthly realities in which they live.[13] It is this kind of typological distinction I am going to work with tonight.

In addressing the themes of this workshop, I want to ask what the axial transition looks like in the realm of morality. This is a question that rarely stays in clear focus in the axial age conversation, even as a universalising trend in ethical thought is frequently mentioned in passing as one aspect of the axial transition. I am going to explore this kind of moral change in a bit more detail in relation to my Urapmin research. As unlikely as it may seem on the basis of what I have said so far, the Urapmin have the bona fides to make it into the typological version of the axial conversation by virtue of the fact that for all they lack in terms of what they call 'development', they are fervent charismatic Christians. Although never concertedly missionized by the Australian Baptists who arrived amongst their neighbors in the 1960s, the Urapmin quickly sent their children out to learn the rudiments of this new religion. In 1977 everyone in the community converted over the course of a year as they became caught up in a charismatic, Holy Spirit driven revival movement that swept through much of Papua New Guinea as it was carried from place to place by local people. By the time I arrived in Urapmin in early 1991, Christianity was, as the novelist William Kennedy once put it when talking about something else, 'the only cosmos in town.'[14] Achieving Christian salvation was the most prominent and important collective and individual project for pretty much everyone in the community.

I am not going to discuss the conversion of the Urapmin any further here, having done that at length elsewhere.[15] Rather, I want to focus on how becoming Christian transformed Urapmin moral lives. Because Christianity is widely recognised as an axial-type religion, even if its origins fall outside of the classical boundaries of the axial *age* itself, my claim is that the Urapmin experience of moral change may be able to tell us something about axial shifts in morality elsewhere. Moreover, because the Urapmin participation in axial change has been driven pretty much exclusively by their adoption of a heavily moralised Christianity without much in the way of political-economic or other

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[13] Strathern 2019; see also Strathern, this publication.

[14] Kennedy 1978: 282.

[15] See Robbins 2004.

'infrastructural' transformation, their case foregrounds dynamics of moral change in a way that axial transitions elsewhere may not.

As an ethnographer, it is hard to miss the extent to which the Urapmin are preoccupied with moral issues. They talk about them all the time in church and in daily life. In blunt terms, we may say that Urapmin Christian morality is focused on the extent to which people fail to live up to the ethical demands of their new faith. Individuals routinely proclaim that they are 'sinners', bad people who need to strive for moral improvement if they are to go to heaven when Jesus comes back. And since Jesus could come back at any moment, they constantly remind one another that people need always to work on the moral state of their souls, to strain to avoid sinful feelings and actions, and to work through Christian ritual means to cleanse themselves of the sins they nonetheless do commit. Why do Urapmin, who are clearly devoted Christians who spend a great deal of time in church and in bible study and prayer in their own houses, find it so hard to be good? Why are their moral lives, despite their evident piety, so haunted by the spectre of failure? The answer, I want to suggest, follows from the axial nature of their Christian moral understanding.

On Eisenstadt's account, what distinguishes axial moralities from traditional ones is that they are based on 'an autonomous, distinct moral order.'[16] Though he does not elaborate this claim, I think we can take him to mean that axial moralities make ethical demands on people that are not rooted in the expectations or requirements of their social lives, but are rather based on understandings of what perfect lives are or will be like in a transcendent realm in which these mundane expectations will lose their grip. I will flesh out what I mean by this, but first I need to say a bit about traditional, 'pre-axial' Urapmin morality.

Before the advent of Christianity among the Urapmin, their moral system was oriented toward a value I have called 'relationalism'.[17] As a value, relationalism defines making and maintaining relationships as the most worthwhile things a person can do. In this it echoes Souvatzi's description of how Neolithic societies of Eurasia made 'the formation and maintenance of networks of interaction (…) a major aim in social organisation.'[18] Toward realizing their

[16] Eisenstadt 1982: 296.

[17] See Robbins 2004.

[18] Souvatzi 2013: 60.

relational version of this aim, Urapmin are constantly giving food crops they have grown and harvested to one another so that no one has to eat their own food, an immoral activity they figure as 'eating for nothing', or, put more straightforwardly, eating food that has not been put in the service of making or maintaining any relationships. Moreover, many traditional Urapmin rituals involve relation-creating or reinforcing exchanges. And whenever relationships fall under threat because of disputes between two or more parties, these parties arrange to exchange exactly the same things with each other at exactly the same time. As one younger man who had briefly attended a government school once told me, these later exchanges, like the constant exchanges of foodstuffs that everyone already grows for themselves, make no 'profit' – but still, he went on to add, 'we do them anyway.' Urapmin do them because they are a key way of realizing the relationalist goals that give shape to their traditional moral lives.

One can also see the relational nature of Urapmin moral life by looking at their moral psychology. This psychology is built around the understanding that there are two parts of the 'heart' (the seat of all thought, feeling, and intention) that people must mobilize correctly in order to succeed in creating and maintaining relationships. The first of these they call the 'will'. This is the part of the heart that leads a person to 'push' others to enter into relation with him/herself, such as by insisting that they should garden together, or share food together, or hunt together, or build their houses in the same village, or engage with each other in some other way. The other part of the heart the Urapmin call 'good thinking', a frame of mind which leads people to act in 'lawful' ways. Behaviour is defined as lawful if it recognises the demands of relations that people already have, so that it leads them, for example, to garden with people they have already gardened with, share food with people they have already shared food with, etc. Ideally, as Urapmin see things in traditional moral terms, wilfulness and lawfulness should work together, such that people use their wills to create new relationships and follow the lawful promptings of their good thinking to ensure that all their relationships remain in good order.

Although I don't have time to go into this in any detail, one can root the appeal of relational values for the Urapmin in the technical details of their social structure. Put simply, an argument along these lines would assert that Urapmin social structural norms are tied to the way their cognatic system of descent-reckoning works out in an endogamous community of 400 people, where everyone can

trace links between themselves and others along numerous pathways and where everyone therefore has a great deal of choice about which potential relationships to participate in – who to marry, to live in a village with, garden with, hunt with, etc. Because this is the case, Urapmin do not imagine that relationships or broader social orders are timeless, or, as it were, come of themselves. Instead, Urapmin assert that such social orders must constantly be made, maintained, and remade, and that for these things to happen people have to put relational values at the top of their moral hierarchy. Given this requirement that people constantly engage in relationship-work, the traditional relational moral system is tightly integrated with Urapmin social life, and to succeed socially is also to succeed morally by correctly balancing wilful, expansive relational impulses and lawful ones aimed at maintaining the relations one already has.

As the Urapmin understand their Christian morality, it is based on a very different core moral value. Given that this value came to the Urapmin from the very Protestant Christian tradition that many argue profoundly shaped the modern West, we can call this value 'individualism' in something close to our own commonsense terms.[19] At the heart of this individualism is the conviction that God will deal with each person as an individual, and that one's ultimate fate therefore depends upon the moral state of one's own heart at the time of Jesus's return, rather than on the moral state of any relations one might have to others. As one Urapmin person put this to me very eloquently, in Christianity 'everyone has to have their own belief.' 'My wife,' he went on, 'cannot break off part of her belief and give it to me, I have to have my own.' If you remember how hard Urapmin work never to eat their own food, and add to this the observation that sometimes husbands and wives split their gardens into 'his' and 'hers' halves so that even food shared between them constitutes a relation enhancing gift from one to the other, you can grasp why this man felt the need to stress this point.

Urapmin efforts to realize the Christian individualist value have led to a profound change in their moral psychology; the interior state the person now aims to achieve is not a careful balancing of wilful and lawful impulses, but rather one that is marked by an 'easy' feeling that signals that one is free of wilful drives and able to avoid the sinful practices of pushing others, arguing, fighting, stealing, etc. to which they can lead. In Christian terms, having only lawful feelings is the

[19] See Dumont 1986.

sole route to having an easy, lawful heart, and the will is now condemned as sinful by nature. One sees this new emphasis on lawfulness over wilfulness playing out in many central areas of Urapmin lives. For example, in the name of the value of Christian individualism, some otherwise highly skilled and well liked Urapmin people who appear qualified to take up leadership roles have failed to pursue them so as to avoid the kinds of wilful behavior the occupation of such positions requires, or as they put it, to avoid 'ruining' their 'Christian lives'. Others have withdrawn from the will-driven, contentious exchanges that surround marriage (perhaps the ultimate wilful act of relation creation). More generally, the pursuit of an easy heart has attenuated for many the appeal of participation in any aspect of public life. In a different way, the same individualist point emerges from that fact that in the past, if one had angry feelings they could make ill the person with whom one was angry. This motivated people to wilfully push others to engage in significant ritual work of the kind I mentioned above to repair relations that had descended into rancorous dispute. By contrast, now, in Christian times, people say that if you are angry, this will make you yourself sick. Even if you have good reasons to be angry, say someone stole some sweet potatoes from your garden, the anger is still your problem – it is still ruining your Christian life by spoiling your moral condition, and therefore you need to deal with your anger on your own, without in Christian terms worrying about fixing the troubled relationships that are causing it.

But even people like those I have just discussed who forego some of the key relation-making practices of traditional Urapmin life, or who are preoccupied with working on their own to control their anger, do need, just like all other Urapmin, to work toward creating and maintaining at least some relationships in order to survive in the traditional social and economic conditions they still inhabit, and to do this they need to exercise their wills to some extent, regardless of the inevitability of this leading them into sin. No wonder, then, that the Christian model of humanity as sinful by nature makes such good sense to the Urapmin, and no wonder they talk about the difficulty of living moral lives all of the time: from the point of view of their Christian morality they are failures whenever they engage in the wilful relation-making work their social life depends upon, while from the vantage point of their traditional morality, they are failures whenever they succeed as Christians in cultivating the consistently easy lawful heart devoid of the wilful, relation-creating impulses upon which their salvation depends.

Having already noted that traditional Urapmin morality is tightly integrated with the nature of their social lives and social organisation, I can now add that in good axial fashion their Christian morality criticises the moral demands of the Urapmin social world as corrupting and from a point of view that transcends those demands steadfastly refuses to compromise with them. As the sociologist Hans-Georg Soeffner once argued about Lutheranism, so too Urapmin Christian morality promotes an '"impractical"' reason' that 'is under no obligation to the logic of action.'[20] To the extent that this is the case, one cannot meet its transcendent, perfectionist demands and at the same time live successfully in the Urapmin social world. Or, to borrow what I think is most useful from Eisenstadt's way of describing the nature of the axial transformation, the Urapmin now navigate 'a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane' in the shape of the two moral systems that now aim to guide their lives. I would hypothesise that this kind of moral tension marks axial moral experience elsewhere as well, and I would be interested to know whether it shows up in Eurasia.

I see a hint that this might be the case in Hann's argument that one of the things that makes Eurasian societies distinctive in global terms is that they have long had to manage two contradictory forces, one of which pushes for the disembedding of economic relations and the other of which tries to bring them back within the ambit of wider social mandates.[21] Borrowing Hann's Polanyian terms, we might say Urapmin Christian morality is disembedded from its surrounding social order, for it brooks no compromise with the requirements of successful mundane sociality. At the same time, their traditional moral system remains in play despite the way it contradicts their Christian one precisely because people still need to get along in mundane social terms.[22] Perhaps

[20] Soeffner 1997: 41.

[21] Hann 2016.

[22] The distinction between embedded and disembedded ethics I am making here bears comparison with Bernard Williams' influential one between ethical life and the morality system, the latter being a 'peculiar institution' (rather than a universal one) (1985: 174–196) that he links to 'modernization' in fairly axial sounding terms (1985: 8). Of particular importance in this regard is the way the morality system 'is governed by a dream of a community of reason that is too far removed… from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life' (1985: 195). Approaching my own terms here, Webb Keane (2016: 19) makes Williams' distinction central to his own approach to the anthropology of ethics, describing the morality system as one that 'conceals…the ways ethics is socially embedded.' There is thus an opening to bring my discussion into the anthropology of ethics, despite the fact that axial arguments have not played a prominent role in that field to this point.

then we can expect that in societies that have gone through an axial transition, tense, long term general moral negotiations will track close to long term moral-economic ones. Such a claim would be given further support by Strathern's argument tonight to the effect that transcendental orders always end up forming an 'amalgam' with immanent ones as a way of addressing the lived tensions they create.[23] We can see such an amalgam in the ways in which Urapmin Christians have developed a major ritual involving possession by the Holy Spirit (a form of possession which makes the possessed person him or herself a kind of amalgam of the immanent and the transcendent) in order to cleanse people of sin, even as they acknowledge that as soon as the newly cleansed leave the church building at the end of the ritual they will sin again – caught up as they will immediately be in the impossible demands of their disembedded Christian morality.[24] I could go further along this line, but for now I'll just leave this broad claim that similar ethical dynamics born of a tension between transcendent and embedded moral orders might appear in axial societies everywhere, or at least in many places, as a suggestion that I hope may stimulate further discussion.

[23] See also Strathern 2019: 84–87.

[24] On this ritual, see Robbins 2004: 281–288.

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