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Transcendentalist Intransigence: Why Rulers Rejected Monotheism in Early Modern Southeast Asia and Beyond

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Two rulers, one in Africa, one in Asia, are about to undergo the ceremony of baptism following first contact with the Portuguese maritime expansion—but they insist that the rite be conducted in secret. The African ruler is a regional governor (the Mani Soyo) of the Congo King Nzinga Nkuwu who has just converted in 1491.[1] The high king's diplomatic exchanges with the sea captain Diogo Cão had not elicited any real sensation of vulnerability to Portuguese imperial designs, yet he had been happy to convert nonetheless. Now the Mani Soyo is about to follow suit, but he will not have any of his subordinates witnessing the ritual because he does not want them benefiting from the enhanced status and power that the ritual could bestow. In the highlands of Sri Lanka some fifty years later, the King of Kandy is equally intent on keeping his baptismal rites hidden from public view. But his reasons are strikingly different. He does this "lest his people should kill him."[2] When news of the baptism did leak out rioting followed, and the king had to spread the story that it had all been a ploy to deceive the Portuguese.[3]

In one part of the world, conversion to monotheism appears to raise the status of political elites, in another part it is as poison for their legitimacy. We can run this dividing line through early modern Southeast Asia too. In the archipelagic region most of the major centers, typically located on the coasts or up the major waterways by the early modern period, had converted to Islam by 1650 and begun extending their authority into the hinterland, while the Philippines rapidly converted to Christianity.[4] Contrast this with the mainland region of

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[1] MacGaffey 1994: 253–58; Thornton 1984.

[2] According to a report of a letter by him: Simão de Coimbra to João III, Goa, 25 Nov. 1546, in Schurhammer and Voretzsch 1928: 421.

[3] Schurhammer and Voretzsch 1928: 356–57.

[4] The exception is Bali, which managed to retain a broadly Hinduized culture (see below).

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Southeast Asia. Christian and Islamic minorities did develop in Vietnam, and one king of Cambodia, Ramadhipati (Cau Bana Cand, 1643–1658) reigned as a Muslim, but otherwise the impact of the new religions was slight. The mainland kings stood intransigent.

In the first instance, we must relate this pattern to a clear geopolitical logic: the vulnerability of the archipelago to seaborne power, the fissiparous and trade-dependent nature of its polities, the great attractions of its spices for the new maritime military-trading groups, as contrasted with the comparative insulation of the stronger more unified states of the mainland, with their large agricultural hinterlands and considerable command of manpower. The latter were therefore largely able to resist foreign influence, while the archipelagic states were sucked into a 'cold war' dilemma: align themselves with either Christianity or Islam in order to protect their interests or rather succumb to the ascendance of more opportunistic players.

However, we cannot reduce the Southeast Asian pattern to its diplomatic or military fault-lines. Sometimes, the 'soft' power of trade and finance, the entanglements of diplomatic alliance, or the threat of a *coup d'état* could force genuine conversion dilemmas onto mainland rulers. All of these factors came into play during the cosmopolitan reign of Narai (1656–1688) of Siam, for example, to the extent that the French king Louis XIV (1643–1715) sent an expedition expecting to claim his soul for Christ. Having failed, they stubbornly occupied Bangkok. But still Narai was overthrown by a determinedly Buddhist rival who proceeded to put the foreign factions firmly in their place.[5] In other parts of the world, however, elites came to the new religions under their own volition or the lightest of diplomatic touches.

Thus our formula states, *when faced with the dilemma of whether to undergo a wholesale conversion to a religion introduced from an external source, a ruler of a society shaped by established transcendentalist religion is more likely to resist conversion than a ruler of a society in which transcendentalist religion has had a superficial or negligible impact.*

This is not simply to make the claim that the world or transcendentalist religions are particularly resistant to conversion drives. Anthony Reid (1993a; 1993b), for example, makes use of this observation in the course of his compelling account of religious change in early modern Southeast Asia.[6] This is broadly Weberian in its evocation of a shift from "traditional" to "rationalized" religion. The upheavals of the early modern period undermined traditional religious authority and generated a need for the sacred to be lifted high above the messy particularities of local life so that it could speak to the individual

[5] Cruysse 2002; Tarling 1999, pt. 2: 190, 201–2; Kaempfer 1996: 74.

[6] This paragraph hardly does justice to Reid's analysis, whose digestion of the material this paper has relied on in many ways.

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with moral injunctions that were at once personal and universal.[7] Those mainland societies with flourishing Theravada Buddhist and Confucian traditions need only reinvigorate them to respond to the demands of the conjuncture, whereas proselytizers could bring rationalized religion to parts of the island world for the first time. This account is largely concerned with the contrasting capacities of competing religions to answer psychological needs or social functions—it naturally works best for analyzing change across whole populations.

However, in many cases the critical moment for success or failure arose with the attempt to convert the ruler. Such top-down conversion methods had allowed the Christian church to spread across Europe in the first millennium, and would be effective again during the early modern expansion of European powers into the wider world. And at these moments, the ruler's calculations are not so much personal or societal but political, and specifically concerned with the consequences for his *legitimacy*.

Exactly why rulers subscribing to transcendentalist religions should encounter particular obstacles to conversion has not yet been clearly articulated. This article will (1) attempt to clarify what those obstacles are. However, the problem is to advance a significant generalization without falling into historical determinism, so we shall go on to (2) show how the force of these obstacles depends on certain key historically contingent processes, namely the development of the indigenous moral community, the state, and the ruler's geopolitical situation. We shall conclude with (3) a wider discussion of the implications of our argument. A paper using sixteenth-century Sri Lankan history has already been published; the Southeast Asian case study will have to wait for another publication. This article is instead intended to be as complete a theoretical statement as space will allow.[8]

AXIAL AGE RELIGION

The concept of the Axial Age was first used by Karl Jaspers (1953) to describe the great sea change in philosophical and religious thought that plunged through the societies of ancient Israel, ancient Greece, Upanisadic India, Zoroastrian Iran, and early imperial China in the first millennium B.C.

[7] Reid 1993a: 135; 1993b: 152; and compare with Tarling 1999, pt. 2: 181–83. In other words, early modern Southeast Asia as a whole provided an ecology that would confer an evolutionary advantage to rationalized forms of religion, both as a means for normal people to make sense of their world, and as a means for elites to re-order it to their liking. The label of "traditional religion" might subsume too much variety to be effective, while there are doubts over the appropriateness of the language of rationality, see Hefner 1993.

[8] Strathern 2007. Space did not allow a number of nuances and qualifications that were included in the first draft, most importantly: (1) a discussion of how Hinduism does and does not fit into the definition of 'transcendentalist' religion; (2) the particularities of the relationship between the clerisy and absolutist monarchies, and the different kinds of separation between secular and temporal authority one finds within transcendentalist societies; (3) a more detailed consideration of Reid's work and its relationship to the arguments here.

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"Secondary breakthroughs" followed in the form of Buddhism, Christianity, and, much later, Islam.[9] In all these regions second-order thinking and a critical stance towards the mundane world developed, as pre-existing world-views were rendered suddenly unsatisfactory by quickening social change, diversity, and conflict.[10] The answer was a new and radical vision of the transcendent as an ultimate reality which existed in contrast to, and in tension with, the mundane world, and which generated a new set of norms to live by. When this insight was harnessed to religious vehicles, as happened with the Abrahamic and Indic religions, the obligation to sustain ties with a distant divinity—or to detach oneself from the inherent corruption of the mundane world—became a source of angst. It now required a profound transformation of the self and that leap into the transcendent that we know of as salvation.

The Axial Age idea, like any generalization of equivalent vastness, needs to be constantly pruned if it is not to outgrow its allotted role and throw more universal features of human thought into the shade. By definition, all societies with a sense of the supramundane hold it to be different *in some sense* to the mundane; all societies allow some form of critical and skeptical thinking.[11] Most importantly, all theorists seem to agree that societies that embrace Axial Age traditions will also find room for other kinds of religiosity.[12] We might put it that the gap between the transcendent and the mundane needs to be actively forced ajar against tendencies to see our world as suffused with the divine. Indeed, most Axial Age traditions have some notion of immanence, whether manifest in Catholic saints, Buddhist relics, or Hindu *devaraja*s. They all answer universal needs for this-worldly aid as well as other-worldly transportation, for "communal" as well as "salvation" religion in Ernest Gellner's (1991) terms. Or, to use Harvey Whitehouse's (2000) framework, for the ecstasies of "imagistic" experience as well as the dry strictures of "doctrinal" obedience. The four obstacles to conversion are:

(1) *The Moral Sensibility of Subjects*. Doctrinalism is what the transcendentalist religions specialize in, of course, as the source of religious legitimacy is externalized and delimited by placing it within a text or a relatively immutable oral tradition. This is one reason why the Axial Age traditions are unusually effective at welding together a dispersed population into a coherent moral community. They promote a uniquely explicit and codified morality, one that can be disseminated by trained pedagogues across the length and breadth of a territory

[9] For more, see Schwarz 1975; Eisenstadt 1986; Eisenstadt and Schluchter 1998; and Bellah 1964, which all derive from Weber's (1956) work on prophetic religions and their rejection of the world as given.

[10] These conditions also characterize early modern Southeast Asia: one might say it was the epoch in which the Axial Age truly arrived in the region as a social milieu as well as a type of doctrine.

[11] On the latter, see Goody 1996.

[12] See Geertz 1973.

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peopled by otherwise diverse groups. And, crucially, that moral universe will now contain religious discourses directly addressed to the proper conduct of political power. To be a king is not only to be a patron of religion or its principal officiant, but its moral exemplar and guardian. There can thus develop a sense of spiritual contractualism in the relationship between ruler and subject, in that the king's legitimacy is contingent on his religious role. It is often implicit—and sometimes made explicit—that if he fails in these duties he can be overthrown.[13]

(2) *The Nature of the Priesthood.* The moral community finds its voice—or is ventriloquized—by the clerisy. The conceptual tension at the heart of the Axial Age imagination is institutionalized in the relationship between the clerisy and the political elite: an "antagonistic symbiosis."[14] Political power must now appeal to a quite alien realm of norms and institutions. So many paradoxes spin out from this tension: the power of the clerisy to sanction authority issues from their power to question it, just as the ability of ascetics to legitimize this-worldly pursuits comes from their lived denigration of the same. For the clerisy of Axial Age religions are no longer merely sacramental. They typically answer to a new need for the ascetic, for religious virtuosi to stand truly within the gaze of the transcendent so that the rest of us do not have to. And the priesthood now holds the trump card: however vast the earthly reach of a king, his glories contract to nothing when set within a transcendental frame. The most famous proselytizer of the Portuguese east, Francis Xavier, who received so much personal support from the Portuguese King Dom João III (1521–1557), still saw fit to offer his liege such stark admonitions as this: ". . . the hour of your death, when you will give an account to God of your whole life past, which will come sooner than Your Highness thinks. Therefore be prepared for it. . . . You will find yourself dispossessed of your kingdoms and lordships, and entering others, where it will be a novel experience for you (which God may avert) to find yourself excluded from paradise."[15]

Whatever mundane concerns were presented to him by his secular advisors, other worlds altogether hovered above his every deed. One can find this same message expressed in countless ways in all transcendentalist societies, and sometimes in so severe a form as to render rulership inevitably corrupt, as in the Theravadin *Mugapakkha Jataka*, and its account of kings plunging to hell.[16] All societies, of course, have people who specialize in dealing with

[13] See Smith (1978: 76) for an eloquent expression of the provisional nature of legitimated authority, which is particularly apt for Axial Age dynamics. For example: ". . .grounding authority in the structure of the universe makes it more, not less vulnerable to attack, yet it is essentially the incumbent who is liable, more than the values and traditions he represents."

[14] The phrase is Gunawardana's (1979: 344). See also Collins 1998: 14–21, 32–37; and Silber 1995.

[15] Cochin, 26 Jan. 1549, in Schurhammer and Voretzsch 1928: 534.

[16] Collins 1998: 36; and see the *Rajavaliya* (Suraweera 2000: 5).

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the supernatural and whose position will be threatened by the conversion drives of proselytizing religions.[17] But Axial Age priesthoods present a particularly forbidding obstacle here because their perspective is potentially so radically independent from the interests of the political elite.

Much more important, however, is that their appeal to moral imperatives would have special resonance among society at large. In non-transcendentalist societies, one often finds a great distinction between the specialists who undertake the religious articulation of kingship at the court and those who minister to the everyday supernatural transactions of common people.[18] In Axial Age societies there will be an institutional and ideological structure that overarches both the court and popular society: the Church in Christian kingdoms, for example, or the *Sangha* in Buddhist ones. In both cases the whole institution would immediately be placed under threat by the conversion of the ruler, and may be able to mount resistance at all levels of society.

(3) *The Apprehension of the Transformation*. Axial Age clerisies are geared towards combating other religions, ready and able to meet opponents in metaphysical debate. This should alert us to an important point: that transcendentalist discourses typically contain a strongly developed notion that they are different and preferable to others. They induce rulers and their advisors to become more 'apprehensive'—in both senses of the term, more uneasy and more comprehending—of what proselytizers are asking of them. In explaining this we have to negotiate some tricky nuances between an affront to *tradition* and an affront to *identity*, or between religious *change* as opposed to *conversion*. We have had many salutary warnings of late not to make our understanding of world religions too focused on clean doctrine rather than messy behavior, or blind to the fluid currents of exchange that can wash across religious boundaries. But if we go too far down that road we begin to lose sight of what makes the world religions so distinctive and successful. Their clerisies are distinguished by their particular ability to keep the boundary fences in good repair.

This is in part the result of the construction of religious life as a matter of doctrine or semantic knowledge, and therefore, potentially, of orthodoxy.[19] But the loss of innocence in the Axial Age revolution was crucial. Now

[17] These naturally have a great incentive to mount resistance. Among the Tarahumara of New Mexico (Merrill 1993: 139), for example, the Jesuits found that such ritual specialists were often their most vehement opponents. The revolts that broke out in the mid-seventeenth century yoked together political and religious concerns, just as the Spanish pacification programme itself had done. But remember we are concerned with the rather different context of a ruler's dilemma in which wider society may not yet have experienced a conversion drive or yet be politicized by external aggression.

[18] See Eisenstadt 1986: 4, on the new "potential country-wide status consciousness" of Axial-Age elites. The Druids of the first few centuries B.C. in Europe are a possible counterexample of a non-transcendentalist clerisy with trans-local/regional, trans-status function.

[19] Whitehouse (2000: 9–13, 39–41) makes this point strongly but his argument is especially germane to transcendentalist religions.

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there was an irredeemable self-consciousness to the production of spiritual knowledge. The secondary breakthroughs of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism bear the most striking hallmarks of this self-consciousness. In other words, Axial Age religions are predicated on an awareness that other forms of religious life are possible but are mistaken. In this sense they tend to be "ideologies" as defined by Gellner, which is to say they are *offensive* to alternatives rather than blithely unaware of them.[20] Their clerisies have thereby been able to promote the most durable kinds of 'imagined community' in world history. In early modern Asia, the language of religious identity and community can be seriously misleading if it is taken to imply exclusivity—but this implication is unnecessary for our argument, as we shall see.

Rulers of non-transcendentalist societies tended to be less 'apprehensive' of monotheistic demands, their lack of a pre-existing notion of conversion rendering them more susceptible to the fact of it. In Europe, the elite transition to Christianity from paganism was facilitated by the fact that the latter was not based upon the principle of the redundancy or evil of other religions. The notion of 'other religions' itself probably had little meaning given how ready pagans were to accept new gods and rites in an endless cycle of invention. And, importantly, the flow of such god-adoptions was not determined by the dynamics of political power: conquerors could adopt the gods of the conquered.[21] It is not then that the change to Christianity itself was any less dramatic but that the conceptual acceptance of it was less traumatic. We can appeal to the grand example of the Roman Emperor Constantine (306–337), who was able to transform the official cult of the Roman Empire towards Christianity without suffering any serious loss of authority. Nor was this because he was simply responding to an unstoppable groundswell from below—only roughly one-tenth of the empire's population was Christian by the time he decided to put this new creed to the test.[22] In the ensuing century, however, paganism was to be crushed from above.

In fact, in non-transcendentalist societies the acceptance of monotheism could *enhance* the legitimacy of the elite, in the short as well as the long term. Nineteenth-century Christian missions in parts of Africa and the Pacific often pursued the policy of top-down conversion with great success. On the east coast of Africa the emperor of Monomotapa would convert to Christianity in 1629 in order to emphasize his authority over the Karanga tribal confederation.[23] And, as we noted in the introduction, the same process can be seen in the earliest days of Portuguese overseas endeavor along the west coast of Africa. Certainly the welcome of the Congo elite owed something to the fact that the

[20] Collins (1998: 38–39) quotes Gellner, following Kierkegaard; Geertz 1973: 170–75.
[21] As David Hume (n.d.: 536) noticed of the Romans in "The Natural History of Religion."
[22] Hopkins 1999: 86, and see 79. There is naturally much controversy over such estimates.
[23] Po-Chia Hsia 1998: 176.

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imposed model of conversion had been partially resisted. Baptism was primarily interpreted as an initiation into a superior version of the local spirit cult. That the Congo kings were not placed under any imperial duress and succeeded in retaining power over the Church, combined with the more tolerant approach of the pre-Counter Reformation missionaries, meant that Christianity could take root on indigenous terms.[24] Yet we need not underplay the great changes that baptism entailed: these rulers were happy to ascribe prestige to a foreign cult, to copy the rites of a foreign ruler—and indeed take his name—and oversee the swift innovation of a Congolese Christianity. Most important of all, they could issue orders for the destruction of 'idols,' for a better idol had come their way. They were able, in other words, to move much further towards a model of conversion that was acceptable to missionaries without placing their authority under intolerable strain. Indeed, it is this ability to welcome innovation through assuming continuity that characterizes the non-transcendentalist approach to conversion. If, as in the late fifteenth-century Congo, this proceeded via a "dialogue of the deaf," in transcendentalist societies this dialogue was always more prone to collapse into a sort of mutual comprehension.[25]

(4) *The Vulnerability of the System to Comparison.* In all sorts of societies a ruler may risk his legitimacy if he refuses to participate in traditional rites. But the disagreeable judgments this will invite in a transcendentalist society have a different quality. We have to reflect here on the difference between *infelicity* and *immorality*. Axial Age traditions are much less vulnerable to the claims of competing religions that they are better at improving one's lot in this life. If the significance of the correct relationship with the divine is to be found on this plane of existence, then the efficacy of a ritual or the worth or existence of a deity are potentially subject to empirical criteria. Of course, in the normal course of life, the tragic or unexpected can be readily accommodated within the embrace of the status quo, and we should not underestimate just how flexible and fecund traditional worldviews can be in responding to the contingencies of human existence. But particularly where another religion intrudes and presents itself as a competitor—when the pre-existing cult loses its sense of absolute givenness—then catastrophes or unfavorable contrasts can sometimes spell the end of non-transcendental religion. Among transcendentalists, on the other hand, they often provoke impassioned soul-searching and a renewed commitment. While the *incumbents* of power may be vulnerable in both kinds of society, only in the former is the *system* that describes power itself truly

[24] See also Almeida (2004: 865–88) for the skepticism of Jesuits working there a few decades later. Interestingly, they seem to have picked up that the lack of a transcendent dimension to indigenous religion (no 'God' or systematicity) meant both that (a) there was no obstacle to the eager acceptance of Christian rites, and (b) that the actual Christianization of the populace would be much harder, requiring a total transformation of society.

[25] Once the exclusivist demand to abandon traditional rites was brought home.

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vulnerable. To the transcendentalist mind, all the twists and turns of life can be assimilated to an ultimately mysterious higher narrative or mechanism. The transcendental is by definition never at fault, it is merely men's comprehensions of it that are mistaken. These latter comments are particularly relevant to monotheism, in that the Indic religions tend to imagine a more direct relationship between mundane status and karmic or soteriological status. But that mechanism plays itself out before and after this life, and the system that describes it is relatively impervious to empirical threats in itself. Rewriting a 'magical' order is always possible; rewriting a moral-soteriological order is an altogether different proposition.

One way in which the legitimacy dilemma can be resolved for neophyte rulers in non-transcendentalist societies is when the sheer power and success of the proselytizers is interpreted as deriving from the superior potency of their god(s). The traditional cult appears suddenly feeble or pointless by contrast. Again, the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity must be the iconic example. It followed his success at the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 A.D., which confirmed intimations from the god Apollo about the new religion made in a traditional oracle beforehand. The old segued into the new; a one-way process, to be sure: succeeding Christian emperors were not going to subject their beliefs to experiment in that way.[26] It has now become common in missionary history to show how ready many peoples in Africa, the Pacific, and elsewhere, were to endow proselytizers with coveted supernatural powers or exercise a "ruthless pragmatism" (Eaton 1997: 275) in arbitrating between the value of competing spiritual techniques. The European missionaries who arrived in Asia intent on capturing the souls of kings were not then simply beguiled by millenarian optimism. But they were largely to be frustrated.

CONTINGENCIES

The first three factors pinning a ruler to the status quo do not spring into existence full-grown as soon as he accepts a world religion. They are best seen as potentials that depend on certain inter-linked historical processes for their fullest realization. The more that society has been gathered into a moral community; the more the clerisy have established strong relationships with all levels of society and maintained their discipline, manifest otherworldliness, and centralized hierarchy; the more that identity politics have become highly

[26] When Rome was sacked in 410 A.D., there were of course pagans who attributed this to the abandonment of traditional gods. But the response of Christian thinkers is telling: Augustine could argue that all human affairs were flawed and that from an eternal perspective, the event was insignificant. A writer in Gaul in 416 could describe the mundane suffering in detail and then undermine that with, "But the wise man, the servant of Christ, loses none of these things, which he despises; he has already placed his treasure in Heaven." It was, moreover, typical to claim that this was retribution for being sinful, that is, not truly Christian. See Ward-Perkins 2005: 29–31.

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charged—the more our argument applies. The last issue is worth particular attention, given that the Axial Age religions have been far from uniform both in the way that they have conceived their boundaries and the extent to which they have insisted on them.[27] Most important perhaps are the differences between monotheistic and Indic variants. Buddhism and Hinduism have shown a particular ability to tolerate and incorporate new or foreign religious forms, with their adherents liable to slip into forms of devotional behavior that pay little heed to doctrinal constraints.[28] Note, however, that the prospect of a ruler's conversion arouses the attention of the border guards like no other: his religious behavior is too visible, too politically significant to be left to evolve on its own terms or to languish in the half-light of lay understandings.[29]

In many parts of Eurasia these potentials were realized over the second millennium, gathering particular pace in the early modern period. But nevertheless, our evocation of deep connections between the ruler and a moral community of his subjects might be seen to stand somewhat against the flow of recent theory emphasizing the disjuncture between high and low culture in pre-modernity. We need then to guide our argument around two pitfalls left by our familiarity with the modern nation state: first, the assumption of a natural unity between the religion of the political elite and that of wider society, and second, the assumption of a natural unity between the boundaries of political sovereignty and a single religious system. We shall be all the more dexterous if we keep in view the early modern paradox of the way in which political and religious boundaries were being invested with more meaning in this period just as they were being trounced by its cosmopolitan energies.[30]

[27] Within monotheism, Reid (1993a: 170) suggests that Islam was often better able to accommodate local religious forms than its rival, which accounts for its greater success in Southeast Asia. Even within Christianity, pre-Reformation forms tended to have a more generous approach to the vagaries of popular spirituality than the ardent confessionalism of Protestant and Counter Reformation Catholic missionaries from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. Perhaps we might do better to consider identity in pre-modern Theravadin societies, for example, if we conceive of the moral injunction as 'to be Buddhist,' rather than 'to be *a* Buddhist.' Yet this can generate notions roughly equivalent to those of religious antagonism, heresy, and conversion (Gunawardana 1979: 202; Walters 2000: 133).

[28] Carrithers (2000: 852) has described this as a "polytropic" tendency.

[29] In the case of sixteenth-century Sri Lanka, wherever a ruler may have imagined that he could play along to the missionaries' tune while still conducting the usual orchestra of Buddhist-Hindu court ritual behind their backs, it did not take too long before he found his naivety disabused or his deceit exposed.

[30] One can contrast Lieberman's vision of early modern Eurasia hosting pockets of solidifying political/religious units with Sanjay Subrahmanyam's (1997; 2005a; 2005b) emphasis on the cosmopolitanism and the 'connectedness' of apparently diverse regions; the way in which civilizational and state boundaries dissolve in the face of common conjunctures and the circulation of elites in this period.

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The Place of Religion in Society

What does our formula mean by an "established transcendentalist religion"? We mean one that has achieved a fundamental institutional presence in society as a whole. For the history of Buddhism, Reynolds and Hallisey (1989) have described a general shift from a "civilizational" phase, in which it was essentially a cosmopolitan phenomenon of monastic centers patronized by imperial elites in urban centers, to a much more localized "cultural" phase, in which the monastic orders settled within cultural or state boundaries and began to spread deeper roots among society at large. They see this as beginning in the fifth century and culminating in the ninth to the thirteenth. In these contexts, rulers are likely to see the ability to expand and remodel a moral community as an attractive adjunct to their authority. They are thereby led to promote the extension of monasteries and temples throughout the land, the circulation of texts, the practice of undertaking pilgrimages, the elaborate holy rites of kingship itself.[31] Yet just as the ruler's religious legitimacy is disseminated and internalized, so are the criteria by which he ought to be judged.

Closely associated, of course, are the trend towards vernacularization and the whole package of progressive religious-cultural-ethnic homogenization that Lieberman proposes for the "protected rimlands" of Eurasia.[32] The ethnic or patriotic feelings that were beginning to emerge out of the endemic warfare and competition in these regions were also significant, for these could fuse with religious sensibilities in powerful ways, allowing groups to see themselves as spiritually special, endowed with a transcendental destiny.[33] Scholars interested in why missions have largely failed in Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist societies have referred to the "cultural self-consciousness of the greatness of the religious tradition" they subscribed to (Obeyesekere 1979: 629–30).[34]

These arguments, of course, are relevant for both ruler conversion dilemmas and broader processes of religious change. In that vein, they help to explain why transcendentalist ideologies tended to give way more easily in the Indian subcontinent at times, particularly during the first millennium. The shift from Buddhism to Brahmanism in northern India owes much to the

[31] Lieberman 2003: 138; Smith 1978: 84.

[32] Pollock 1998; Lieberman 2003.

[33] This is another paradox, of course, in that universalistic religions are able to reify such categories just as they also make them irrelevant. Nevertheless, it is one that has been demonstrated for Theravada Southeast Asia: see Lieberman 2003: 43, 200–2, 262; Tambiah 1978: 112; and Roberts 2004.

[34] Also Obeyesekere 1995: 239. Charles Keyes argued that one reason why Christianity failed among the Thai was its conceptualization as irredeemably foreign. Converts thereby placed themselves "in an ambiguous [...] relationship to a state that rules in the name of a Buddhist nation" (1993: 277–74).

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former's development into an imperial cult detached from its roots in popular society, which rather embraced the latter.[35] Much later, Islam would then take its place as the dominant religion in parts of the subcontinent, partly simply through the rise and expansion of Islamic political powers, but also through a slower process of acculturation, as the culture of the new elite achieved widespread cachet.[36] Richard Eaton (1997: 26) has found it misleading to describe the Islamicization of Bengal as "conversion" because the phenomenon "proceeded so gradually as to be almost imperceptible," and the line separating Islam from non-Islam was "porous, tenuous, and shifting."[37]

Where a transcendentalist religion is largely confined to the elite of great capital cities, or its literati has seen itself as primarily part of a much larger (Sanskrit, Pali, Graeco-Latin) ecumene than a local society, its rulers are then more likely to succumb to new Axial Age religions. This describes island Southeast Asia much better than the mainland region of course. The signs are that the Hindu-Mahayana civilizations of Malaya and Sumatra had been largely a matter of royal cult, which made little attempt to strike deep roots among the population.[38] In the Philippines, where transcendentalism had made little or no impact before the sixteenth century, the conversion of elites was rapid and comparatively effortless. Bali, the most trenchantly Hinduized of the islands, remained uniquely intransigent, as the polities of Majaphit and Gelgel managed to hold on and even extend their authority into east Java, Lombok, and Sumbawa.[39] By the time monotheism arrived as a force in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the mainland polities had adopted a territorialized, popularized, doctrinalized Theravada Buddhism modeled on the Sri Lankan Mahaviharan tradition, and their rulers proved virtually immune to the new faiths.

[35] Eaton 1997: 10–14.

[36] And as the mysticism of the *Sufis* in particular resonated with villagers. See Eaton 1997: 52–60, on the conversion of the Bengali Sultan Jalal al-Din Muhammad; Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000.

[37] Our formula refers to intransigence towards religion "introduced from an *external* source." Over a long enough time scale, an external religion can attain a measure of influence that allows it to be perceived as indigenous. We are equally unconcerned by internal developments within Axial Age traditions such as 'secondary breakthroughs' (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism), or schisms (the European Reformation). Although this will raise many issues we cannot properly address here, often conversions between different schisms can be understood as the acceptance of a more faithful obedience to traditional religious authorities or principles. Where, for example, we find princes switching between Catholicism and Protestantism in sixteenth-century Europe, note they are attracted to a reformation of *their own* civilization, both confessions being based on the Bible as a common touchstone of legitimization. Similarly, whereas Reid and Lieberman have emphasized the way that mainland princes appealed to the Theravada Pali tradition as an external source of legitimacy, we can emphasize that it was yet couched within a broader common heritage in which the authority of the Buddha remained paramount.

[38] Reid 1993a: 142; Tarling 1999, pt. 1: 322.

[39] Tarling 1999, pt. 2: 182.

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The Nature of the State

The second pitfall to avoid is imagining that some equivalent of the post-Reformation European dictum of *cuius regio, eius religio*, could be applied here, which would be analytically disastrous. Throughout many parts of Asia the monarch was typically intent on patronizing or at least tolerating many different religious traditions, often as a means of gathering various ethnic or cultural groups under his dominion. By no means, then, is transcendentalist intransigence to be confused with a general cultural resistance or a xenophobic intolerance. Indeed it is this essentially welcoming disposition that makes the religious resistance of rulers so remarkable.

Yet transcendentalist intransigence seems to remain in place even where rulers have come to represent a number of different moral communities. An eclectic royal cult need not imply the king has no 'identity' in the sense we have pursued here of a set of religious responsibilities, even if it only becomes obvious in the context of a conversion dilemma. Monotheism, with its requests for exclusivist interior affiliation as opposed to exterior recognition, has no patience for this sort of juggling act: it will simply seek to stick its hand in so that the old spheres of religious patronage crash to the floor and the ruler is left clutching only the one shiny and new ball placed in his hands.

Nevertheless, a consideration of the diversity of state-forms in early modern Asia requires of us a clarification: the most relevant relationship is not between a ruler and his subjects per se, but between a ruler and a primary moral community of his subjects.[40] The great powers of Eurasia, those that came closest in actuality to that common ideal of 'universal empire' in the diversity of their dominions, presented particular problems of rulership ideology. A chameleon ritualism was often the result, by which the emperor was able to become a different religious figurehead to each of his subject peoples in turn.[41] Sometimes, where we have rulers lording it over an agglomeration of peoples who enjoy a rough parity, it may become difficult to discern a 'primary' metropolitan society or core ethnic elite. In such cases, many of the principles of 'transcendentalist intransigence' lose their relevance. However, normally one can distinguish a core elite that forms the primary moral community to which rulership ideology is held accountable.

We could think of the later years of Akbar's reign (1556–1605) in this light, and his imperious attitude to the various priests and virtuosos who populated the Mughal court. Rebellions among his subjects of central Asian origin led

[40] For, particularly with regard to states under military conquest elites, certain groups of subjects can be excluded from any religious contractualist discourses, or asked to appeal to secular principles of just government. Even subject transcendentalist elites may be excluded. But the more integral, permanent, and vital to the state they are perceived to be, the greater the expectation that they ought to have some religious accommodation in kingship ideology.

[41] Such as the Qing emperors or Ottoman dynasts (Bayly 2004: 32–34).

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Akbar to expand his power base so as to incorporate the wide variety of non-Muslims who had come under his scepter.[42] He thereby sought to remodel religious language on his own terms and reconcile all his subject moral communities to a new syncretic 'divine religion.'[43] This might count as a 'conversion' of a sort, in its radical move away from traditional Islam, but it is one that was born out of a desire to respond to the moral sensibilities of all his subjects rather than abjure them: almost the very inverse of the exclusivist conversion as proposed by his Jesuit attendants. Moreover, even the immense secular power of Akbar was not enough to sustain his spiritual project after his death; his successor quickly reverted to a more orthodox Islam.[44]

In the smallest of states, on the other hand, it was possible for an immigrant monotheistic group to quickly become its most powerful moral community. One thinks here of the port-city states that prevailed in island Southeast Asia, which were heavily dependent on a coastal capital dominated by a variety of foreign groups specializing in trade, finance, mercenary activity, shipbuilding, and so on. In the absence of any large hinterland of tribute-paying subjects the ruler's authority may depend principally on the acquiescence of such diverse groups. Following Lieberman's (2003) geopolitical spectrum, both of these types of early modern polity—the great land empires and the little trading emporia—flourished in the "unprotected" regions of Eurasia that were vulnerable to conquest or domination by foreign elites. At the other end of the spectrum, we find the "protected rimlands," and it is particularly here, but also elsewhere, that we are likely to find states in which the ruler's sovereignty is neither so sprawling as to detach his legitimacy from the sensibilities of its ethnic core, nor so small as to be skewed towards the bustling cosmopolitan energy of a trading city. Here the indigenous subjects can be considered as having formed a primary moral community by virtue of their decisive collective ability to frame the norms of politico-religious legitimacy.[45]

In the courts of Sri Lanka and other Theravada countries, we therefore find highly syncretistic, cosmopolitan tendencies that are nevertheless contained

[42] See Subrahmanyam (2005a: 124–27) on the evolution of this ideology.

[43] With little success: the priestly disputants failed to agree (see Camps 1957: v).

[44] Furthermore, as late as 1586, he had to resort to orthodox and defensive language in order to counter the suggestion of a Turani prince that he had ceased to be a good Muslim (Subrahmanyam 2005b: 4–5, 54–55).

[45] It is important to remember that even in these polities, monarchical imagery was directed towards at least three audiences: (1) the ruling elites of neighboring or even quite distant states, one's rivals, allies, marriage partners: how am I a king in the way that others are? (2) The various unassimilated foreign groups subject to the crown, including: specialist elites such as merchants, bodyguards, ritualists, diplomats; larger immigrant communities settled within the core territories, often traders or mercenary groups, but also simply immigrant chiefs and their followers; and lastly outlying peoples over whom *cakravartin* status has been asserted. Thus even such polities as these often take on the rhetoric, and sometimes the characteristics, of universal empire. (3) The indigenous subjects.

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within a framework preserving the supremacy of Buddhist tradition in some form.[46] The king must conduct himself as a *dhammaraja*, patronize the *Sangha*, provide the socio-political context in which enlightenment can be attained, and take part in an elaborate series of Buddhist rites.[47] Note, once again, that this is not a demand for either exclusivity or interiority. The king may have extremely exotic predilections or no taste for spiritual diversions at all, he may even quietly convert in private, but he must perform the minimum of what his traditional role requires—unless he is so secure in his power, insensible, or egomaniacal that the consequences fail to perturb him.

The Position of the Ruler: External Status and Internal Authority

Our interest has been in those rulers presented with a genuine dilemma whether or not to convert, rather than those obviously compelled to do so. But even those with some sort of choice may differ greatly in their ability to act freely in the face of pressures from within and without. The more that any given ruler's interests lie with the preservation of the status quo the more our arguments will apply.

We can understand that status quo both in terms of the regional or geopolitical balance of power and in terms of the internal stability of rule. If we imagine an ambitious petty prince ruling over a smallish city-state perched on the coast of a Southeast Asian island, the feelings of his modest hinterland of subjects might represent a lesser consideration when set against the chance to steal a march over his commercial rivals. The new seaborne powers that burst into these waters had the power to take such a ruler, generally chafing under vassalage to an overbearing neighbor, and inflate him into a regional hegemon. Melaka, for example, was founded as a small fishing village as late as the beginning of the fifteenth century; its ruler converted shortly afterwards to Islam, and only then began its ascendance into a great trading emporium.[48]

As for the internal situation, many of the most enthusiastic neophytes turn out to be people who were alienated from the status quo in the simplest of ways, in that they were not rulers at all, but merely would-be rulers with little authority, as yet, to lose. Across much of South and Southeast Asia, succession was a perennial source of conflict, threatening to tear apart or drastically re-order states under the pressure of competing claimants. Such moments were key entry points for both the political designs of the maritime powers and for their religions. Wherever we look we can find desperate stalkers

[46] Holt 2004. I shall explore all this in detail in the companion article. We can just mention that Mrauk-U or Arakan is often adduced as the most syncretistic of Theravada courts by virtue of its strong Islamicization; yet I shall suggest that this did not dislodge the supremacy of the Buddhist cult of royalty.

[47] See, for example, De Silva 1930: 54; Ariyasena 1987: 100–11.

[48] Tarling 1999, pt. 2: 172.

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of the throne who are willing to defer any considerations of legitimacy to a distant future or to dream of an inglorious reign as mere puppets of foreign military might. One way to ensure the loyalty of a would-be ruler was to render him culturally Christian to begin with, a surprisingly plausible project given the willingness of Asian rulers to allow their sons and heirs to be raised or educated by Christian religious specialists. Many princes from Sri Lankan royal families were whisked away to Goa and Lisbon for a Catholic upbringing, along with others from East Africa, India, Arakan, and island Southeast Asia. The conversion dilemma was thus apparently short-circuited. But other dilemmas mounted to take its place, for installing these 'turncoats' was quite another matter: most of them retired into the bosom of Luso-Indic society never to return, or threw off their Christianity once they were finally on the throne.[49]

However, even a ruler in situ may find that the internal status quo is very much against him, that his legitimacy is already in tatters, that a conspiracy against him is gathering an unstoppable momentum. With little to lose he may then feel that it is worth throwing in his lot with a naval power that could at least offer some short-term respite. Sometimes the existential crisis facing a state can be so acute, the apparent descent into chaos so precipitous, that it will become plausible to establish new politico-religious traditions. This, indeed, forms the context in which the only substantial cases of ruler conversion to monotheism in early modern Theravada societies (that the author has yet come across!) ought to be understood.[50] There are three: in Sri Lanka, the young emperor Dharmapala (1551–1597) converted under severe duress in 1557 and subsequently watched his authority shrivel to the environs of the city of Colombo as many of his subjects defected to a rival prince in Sitavaka. His contemporary in Kandy, Karaliyadde Bandara (1552–1582), also underwent some sort of conversion in order to win Portuguese assistance against the Sitavakan threat. But he appears to have been a Nicodemite, and the century would end with a coup that reconstituted Kandy as the center of Buddhist authority. Cambodia was in desperate need of allies against Dutch and Thai advances and its king Ramadhipati (Cau Bana Cand, 1643–1658) had lost the support of much of the Khmer elite, becoming entirely dependent on a Malay and Cham Muslim faction, when he converted to Islam at the start of his reign.[51]

[49] See Strathern n.d. (forthcoming).

[50] Area specialists may be able to present further examples. If so, the author would be grateful to hear of them.

[51] The Sri Lankan cases are examined in Strathern 2007, while the Cambodian king will be analyzed in the supplementary publication. Regarding the resistance of mainland rulers, we might want to add here the Cham king who converted from Hinduism to Islam sometime between 1607 and 1676 (Reid 1993a: 187). However, by 1611 much of his independence had crumbled under the advances of Vietnam: he was oppressed by the status quo. The Cham might well be considered more part of the island world in terms of commercial, diplomatic, linguistic links, etcetera.

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These cases are striking, and unusual, because they involve the heirs to substantial monarchical traditions. Typically it is lesser 'rulers' who are induced to flirt with monotheism: chiefs, barons, city governors, or sub-kings, more or less removed from central authority. Their greater proclivity to convert was not just the result of their relative disadvantage in the balance of power but of their different relationship to the moral community. Elaborate discourses of religious legitimacy entwine themselves around monarchical and imperial traditions in a way that they do not for more prosaic or rudimentary forms of political power. A king, with his seat at a royal capital surrounded by all the paraphernalia of divine rule and a massive burden of precedent on his shoulders, faces an altogether different set of expectations than an opportunistic chief in some remote province. Hence, in sixteenth-century Sri Lanka, the leaders of men in the *vanniyar* territories east of the highland massif, distant both from the imperial traditions of Kotte and Kandy and from the corresponding religious responsibilities, could react to missionary efforts in a way much more akin to chiefs in the Congo or Pacific.[52] Here, just as we have begun the task of application, we must defer it for another publication.

SOME THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The New Science of Religion

What are the implications of dividing up the religions of this world in this way? Perhaps any kind of grand distinction will bring only minimal analytical payoffs? This is what one might conclude from the perspective of the new science of religion—the popular work emerging out of the fields of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology—which concentrates on the universal features of religious belief and practice. Here, we have stressed the importance of one big difference in the *content* of thought. The new science of religion attends much less to differences in content than to similarities in the ways in which thought is generated, communicated, and remembered in all societies. What is particularly interesting is that some of the answers we have given as to why transcendentalist rulers remain intransigent to conversion look very much like some of the reasons cognitive scientists have given as to why religion per se exists at all.

Scott Atran's work (2002) is among the most comprehensive and sophisticated of this new wave.[53] He suggests that one powerful reason why all societies develop religious behavior is that religion is the only force that can establish a group as a moral community with a distinct identity. Supernatural agents function as "Big Brothers" par excellence, keeping any would-be free-riders firmly in check: "To ensure moral authority survives without the need for

[52] Schurhammer and Voretzsch 1928: 357, 464–65, 474.

[53] Also see Boyer 2001. A huge wave of popular books in a similar vein has begun to rush forth.

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brute force and the constant threat of rebellion, all concerned—whether master or slave—must truly believe that the gods are always watching even when no person could possibly be looking. Once these sacred relations become a society's moral constitution . . . they cannot be undone without risking collapse of the public order that secures personal welfare" (2002: 112). Crucially, one's place in the hierarchy makes no difference. Even the most powerful ruler must make extravagant displays of loyalty to the sacred or risk losing the loyalties of his subjects. Hence Atran (2002: 127) quotes Burkert (1996: 95): "God is to ruler as ruler is to subjects."

For Atran, a sense of religious identity is implicit in all this: one can only make such a commitment to one particular social system at a time. Supernatural agents sanctify "the actual order of mutual understandings and social relations as the only moral and cosmically possible one."[54] There is clearly a great deal of truth in this. It reminds us, for example, that in all societies there is a potential risk for a ruler in converting to a new religion, to the extent that it requires him to step outside the traditional image of what a ruler ought to be and appeal to new norms his subjects may find alien.[55] Nevertheless, we have seen that, in practice, rulers in many parts of the world were able to switch religions without undermining their authority—it was largely in transcendentalist societies that rulers undoing and remaking sacred relations risked the kind of "collapse of public order" to which Atran refers. In these societies, there was not only a common morality, but a codified, written, taught morality that contained explicit interpretations of the proper exercise of political power. Moreover there was often not just an inherent sense of belonging to a community, but also a developed *self-consciousness* of the particularity of that community and its unique access to truth.[56] The lines between one group and another are not always inherently self-evident; people do not always feel bound to the gods or rituals of one tradition. Transcendentalist clerisies are unusually good at making such invisible boundaries utterly palpable.

As for the issue of "disconfirmation," again Atran is right to argue that religious utterances tend to be immune to falsification and contradiction because hearers suspend the usual relevance criteria when appraising them, assuming that their truth is beyond question.[57] Nevertheless, when we come to apply this insight to our theme, we find that we must again incorporate an appreciation of the transcendentalist revolution in the content of belief. In non-transcendentalist traditions, although the existence of deities or the authority

[54] Atran 2002: 117, and see 114–45.

[55] It is then a root dilemma of missionary practice: how to convert a ruler with an unconverted subject population and how to convert a subject population without the support of its ruler.

[56] It is noteworthy that all of the examples of "fundamentalist intolerance of other 'species'" Atran (2002: 120–22) cites are in fact from transcendentalist religions.

[57] Atran 2002: 83–113. Without pushing the point, all the examples on his pages 91–95 happen, again, to be from transcendentalist religions.

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of priesthood may be generally immune from doubt, the *power* of those gods and priests is not. We can illustrate this with reference to Sri Lankan Buddhism, under whose Theravadin transcendentalist framework a world of non-soteriological or 'mundane' supernatural beings were allowed to flourish. In their interactions with these agents, their requests for this-worldly boons, the Sinhalese could behave in essentially a non-transcendentalist mode. In 1587, the Portuguese decided to attack and destroy the cultic center at Devinuvara of one of the most powerful of these deities, the god Upulvan, protector of the Sinhalese kings and people.[58] Their objective was precisely disconfirmation, and this they achieved: after the ransacking of Devinuvara, the shockingly disconfirmed Upulvan disappears from history. The Buddhist framework, however, survived, and indeed shortly afterwards it was vigorously re-established in Kandy.

As we argued in presenting the fourth obstacle above, non-transcendentalist deities are more human-like, their behavior less opaque, their powers limited rather than limitless. Transcendentalist monotheism, by contrast, combines human-like agency with more trenchantly incomprehensible or ineffable qualities, and that agency will be most apparent in the unknowable realm of the afterlife. One cannot know but one trusts that an evil-doer will get their comeuppance at the gates of St. Peter or in their next instantiation as a skink. Transcendentalist utterances tend to be radically quasi-propositional or counter-intuitive, and their priestly articulators particularly able to keep these thought-defying attributes in the minds of their flock.

Typologies of Sacred Kingship

We may not mind fundamental dividing lines as such, but have we drawn them in the right way? Is it rather the case that all the religions of developed states or civilizations promote ruler intransigence? And how does our argument fit in with anthropological accounts of sacred kingship?

Marshall Sahlins has argued that the symbolic construction of kingship usually proceeds from a universal tendency to accord peoples, objects, and forces from the outside with unusual and uncanny power.[59] These forces—foreign, non-human, animal, divine—must somehow be drawn inside society and domesticated to serve its purposes. Hence, the prevalence of the stranger-king figure in the origin-myths of societies ranging from of ancient Greece to modern Fiji. Hence, also, the willingness among diverse indigenous peoples to attribute a desirable spiritual authority to European colonialists in the early days of first-contact. This can manifest itself in the propensity to see

[58] Ferguson 1993: 373–75; Holt 2006.

[59] Sahlins 2006, which builds upon his 1985: 73–103, and which was also kindly offered for discussion at a workshop at Kings College Cambridge, *Beyond Deconstruction: Engaging Colonial Knowledge*, 14–16 Sept. 2006.

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strangers as gods, which is obviously germane to Sahlins' work on Captain Cook.[60] It is also neat for our argument, in its elaboration of the indigenous structures behind a pattern we have already noted: the way in which foreign elites can be accorded both a special power and a special ability to re-order the way in which power is conceived. But, we have suggested that this is only a feature of non-transcendentalist societies; we must slash Sahlins' universe into two.[61]

At some level, Sahlins appears to recognize this, for he suggests that the "cosmocratic" kingdoms of Southeast Asia represent a reversal of his schema: now spiritual power is concentrated at the center and diffuses outwards.[62] But what, in fact, has happened here, is that the transcendentalist revolution has enabled entirely new forms of thinking about and legitimizing political power to predominate, forms that revolve around its relation to ethics, epistemology, and soteriology. Once Theravada Buddhism was established in mainland Southeast Asia, kings sought its renewal in Sri Lanka not out of a generic esteem for the beyond but a desire to tap into a purer version of their own civilization. In the transcendentalist 'cosmography,' the beyond is divided up into lands within and without one's religious ecumene. The latter are liable to be seen as barbarian or disadvantaged. The power *per se* of strangers is less dazzling: what of their access to virtue, truth, salvation?

If Sahlins' model, for all its insight, rather ignores this 'great divide,' so too does a broader anthropological tradition of analyzing sacred kingship that begins with James Frazer and A. M. Hocart.[63] Indeed, this may be why this scholarship has resonated less with historians of monotheistic or Theravadin societies.[64] From this perspective kingship secures well-being for the community as primarily a ritual rather than political device. The king himself may be a deeply ambiguous figure, hovering between purity and impurity, transgression and order, a slave to society, even a scapegoat. One could call this (1) "sacred kingship." For our purposes here, I would propose two further types: (2) "divine kingship," which occurred when centralized states developed a cosmological drama played out by priests and kings elevated to a more distant form of

[60] One need not elaborate on the controversy surrounding this claim (see Obeyesekere 1992; Sahlins 1995).

[61] A similar point could be made for Sahlins' concept (1985: 35–45) of the "heroic mode of historicity," by which the ruler is accorded a disproportionate historical agency. Happily, one example Sahlins gives is the way in which the conversion of a chief in Polynesia entailed the conversion of his people—thus the missionary dream of top-down conversion could be borne out by events. But this was not the case in Sri Lanka or other Theravadin societies.

[62] However, in characteristically structuralist fashion, this seems to be presented as an inversion preserving the integrity of the underlying logic.

[63] Frazer 1922; Hocart 1927; 1933; 1936. This is pursued today by the likes of de Heusch (1997) and Scubla (2005). See Quigley 2005 for an insight into current research.

[64] As we shall see, Hindu kingship has been much more amenable to Hocartian-Frazerian analysis. Incidentally, Hocart was heavily influenced by a sojourn in Sri Lanka—but it is striking how little influence his ideas have had among Sri Lanka specialists.

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godhood; and (3) "righteous kingship," which only emerged in those civilizations that underwent an Axial Age.

I hope to properly explain this tripartite typology of kingship in a subsequent publication, but for the moment it is important to note that elements from the first two strata can remain in place—sometimes in a subdued, archaic form, but also in a truly meaningful manner—when righteous kingship has been adopted.[65] This is more relevant to the Indic world, which allowed for a much more capacious retention of non-transcendentalist traditions than did monotheism.[66] And it is particularly relevant to the multifarious practices that would be subsumed under the name 'Hinduism.' The place of Hinduism in our scheme has been side-stepped here because it would take another article to do justice to its category-defying incorporative appetite. But it is the latter that has allowed the Dumont-Hocart debate to flourish. The former sees a paramount Brahmanical sphere legitimizing a morally inferior secular political realm (righteous kingship); the latter a deified king as the supreme ritual figure serviced by Brahmanical purifiers (sacred and divine kingship).[67]

In the neo-Frazerian picture of 'sacred kingship,' the king's position is, of course, radically conditional, under threat of popular violence. One might expect then some intransigence to the monotheistic injunction to forgo the core ritual functions of kingship. But—to risk some repetition—under the rubric of felicity, the ritual order itself can change rapidly in response to powerful outsiders.[68] This point also applies, if to a lesser extent, to 'divine kings,' on whose ritual propriety the recreation of the cosmos was seen to depend. Such god-king figures lay at the center of the 'state religions' that arose with the establishment of the major agrarian civilizations—in Ancient Egypt and South and Mesoamerica, for example.[69] This is when we see the emergence

[65] These categories, which require a great deal of unpacking elsewhere, are simply presented as aids-to-thought for the moment. I am obviously not proposing a return to an evolutionary model of socio-political development.

[66] Therefore, the notion of a mystical connection between conduct of king and the well-being of society remains as a living element of political reality rather than, say, a literary trope. Contrast the sixteenth-century Sinhala poem *Sitavaka Hatana* (Paranavitana 1999), with the sixteenth-century English history plays of Shakespeare.

[67] Dumont 1966. See Parry 1998, who clarifies the Dumontian position by explicit appeal to the theory of transcendentalism.

[68] This indicates that intransigence is not simply a function of a sense of communal fate and royal subjection to public norms, but of the framework in which those are configured. The divine kings of type (2) tend to be much less vulnerable to public arbitration.

[69] Whitehouse 2000: 170: they arose in lower Mesopatamia, then North China, the Nile and Indus valleys, Mesoamerica and the Andes. This is roughly what Eisenstadt (1986: 20) means by "archaic empires." See also Gellner 1991 and Collins 1998. While Gellner, Whitehouse, and Collins all make this category foundational, they do go on to recognize the importance the further transformations of transcendentalism, literacy, and the breach between clerisy and state as critical. However, Whitehouse's focus on the transmission of religious ideas rather than in their content may thereby underplay the role of transcendentalism in enhancing the potential for a universally applicable group identity.

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of the relationship between "thugs and legitimators" to use Gellner's (1991) curt nomenclature, that is to say, between ruling elites and a newly powerful and bureaucratized clerisy who could offer a divine inflation of their image. Whitehouse (2000) has argued that this development involved a shift from a predominantly "imagistic" to a predominantly "doctrinalist" mode of religiosity, which was able to create a large anonymous religious community sustained by a codified argument-centered form of discourse. Now that the main articulators of monarchical authority were a professional clerisy inevitably dependent on the religious status quo, a key element of intransigence was put in place.

Yet, further decisive disincentives for elite conversion were the result of the transcendental revolution in intellectual content among a select group of these agrarian civilizations. This revolution was not simply a result of civilization, but of unavoidable *challenges* to civilization. That challenge was internalized as tension—that could never quite be resolved—between the norms of established authority (rulers) and those of the other world (the clerisy). Their respective perspectives moved from homologue to dialogue. The clerisy could now conduct that dialogue from a particular position of strength established in the population at large.[70]

One way of testing whether state or transcendentalist categories were crucial would be to enquire into the fate of Inca or Mexica religion—which had not undergone an Axial Age—during the Spanish conquest of South America. Ruler conversion dilemmas *per se* were rather marginal to the success of Catholicism there, given that the Spanish had simply wiped out the pre-existing rulership and were able to re-write the rules of political legitimacy. But is it also possible to observe a kind of empiricist vulnerability to the royal cult and/or popular practices? Did the catastrophic events during the Spanish conquest work to undermine the religious legitimacy of the elite and their rituals, while the contrastive successes of the Spanish enhanced their claims about the supernatural? Another intriguing test case would be Japan, where several strains of transcendentalism had flourished without any one being elevated to the principal legitimating ideology of rule.[71] Is this why Christianity enjoyed its most brilliant—if short-lived—successes among Asian elites there?[72] If the answer to all these questions is broadly positive and if transcendentalism thereby retains its critical role, then it is for others to ponder whether the resilience of Hindu and Confucian rulers ought to be explained in the same terms.

Missionaries in regions where transcendentalism had yet to leave its mark, or had yet to overarch both ruling and popular sensibilities within a single

[70] Indeed, the clerisy can attain a degree of centralization and bureaucratic efficacy that rulers would envy, forming a counter-state, or a model for state. This was particularly the case for the Catholic Church.

[71] Or establishing much sense of exclusive religious identity (Okuyama 2000).

[72] Boxer 1951.

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tradition, such as parts of island southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, or the Pacific, could become inspired by the sense that the world was opening up before them just as it had done for their forebears working in pagan Europe. But their counterparts struggling in the courts of South and mainland Southeast Asia were often left with a sense of having failed to shift an implacable obstacle. Throughout the sixteenth century the myth persisted that Hindus and Buddhists would easily be brought to God in contrast with the stalwart Muslims, but some Europeans began to see that the gratifying religious tolerance of Indic rulers ought not to be confused with a readiness to identify themselves as Christians. We might want to accuse Portuguese commentators on Sri Lankan history of casting their own assumptions about the isomorphic nature of spiritual and temporal conflict onto indigenous resistance. When Diogo do Couto tells us that the Sitavakan king Mayadunne (1521–1581) warned the faltering king of Kandy that if he converted, "his own subjects would try to kill him, in order not to be governed by men of a different law," it appears to fly in the face of some current scholarly emphases on the vanishing subtlety and permeability of religious and political boundaries in pre-modern Asia.[73] The exclusivist connotations of that gloss may have been inappropriate, but it was yet, in another sense, fortuitous: Christian writer and Buddhist king alike recognized the power of the transcendentalist intransigence against conversion

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[73] Ferguson 1993: 126.

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