

An ambitious [article](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.10.063): "Increased Affluence Explains the Emergence of Ascetic Wisdoms and Moralizing Religions", by Nicolas Baumard, Alexandre Hyafil, Ian Morris, and Pascal Boyer in *Current Biology*, 25, 1 (2015) (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.10.063>)

Summary

Background: Between roughly 500 BCE and 300 BCE, three distinct regions, the Yangtze and Yellow River Valleys, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ganges Valley, saw the emergence of highly similar religious traditions with an unprecedented emphasis on self-discipline and asceticism and with "otherworldly," often moralizing, doctrines, including Buddhism, Jainism, Brahmanism, Daoism, Second Temple Judaism, and Stoicism, with later offshoots, such as Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam. This cultural convergence, often called the "Axial Age," presents a puzzle: why did this emerge at the same time as distinct moralizing religions, with highly similar features in different civilizations? The puzzle may be solved by quantitative historical evidence that demonstrates an exceptional uptake in energy capture (a proxy for general prosperity) just before the Axial Age in these three regions.

Results: Statistical modeling confirms that economic development, not political complexity or population size, accounts for the timing of the Axial Age.

Conclusions: We discussed several possible causal pathways, including the development of literacy and urban life, and put forward the idea, inspired by life history theory, that absolute affluence would have impacted human motivation and reward systems, nudging people away from short-term strategies (resource acquisition and coercive interactions) and promoting long-term strategies (self-control techniques and cooperative interactions).