

# Research shows belief in supernatural punishment, rather than 'big gods' of religion gave rise to complex societies

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(Phys.org)—A team of researchers with ties to several different institutions in Australia has published a paper in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* refuting claims made by other researchers that the advent of "big gods" characteristic of such religions as Islam and Christianity, were one of the driving forces that led to large civilized

societies. In their study, they found that instead, it appears a stronger force was more likely fear of supernatural punishment for those still living.

To better understand how we humans managed to wind up living in civilized communities, the researchers studied 96 Asian Pacific cultures and combined what they found with data from models that attempt to replicate evolutionary biology. Their research, they say, indicates that "big gods" was not a factor in humans building large societies that took advantage of cooperation. The most damning detail, they note, is the fact that religions that have "big gods" did not come into existence until after large human communities had already developed. Instead, they suggest it appears much more likely that it was influence from supernatural beliefs, such as fear that not doing as requested, would result in crop failures or locust invasions, that led to large cooperatives that allowed villages to grow to towns and cities.

The team came to this conclusion by gathering ethnographic information from a variety of sources—the data they collected was based on cultural units and was coded by political degree and degree of Moralizing High Gods (MHG) found in early literature. The data was then analyzed using a variety of sampling and phylogenetic methods. They report that they found 22 instances of high political complexity in the area over the time under study despite a low degree of MHG and instead of prompting the development of political complexity, they found that it instead followed its development. They report also that they found instances of belief in supernatural punishment driving political complexity to be much more common. It appeared to both suppress selfishness and promote cooperation.

Despite their findings, the team suggests that more work needs to be done—the mechanism that drove supernatural beliefs, for example is not well understood, though it was clearly used as a tool by some to

manipulate others into cooperating, a necessary factor for the continued existence and growth of communities.

**More information:** Broad supernatural punishment but not moralizing high gods precede the evolution of political complexity in Austronesia, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, [DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2014.2556](https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2014.2556)

### **Abstract**

Supernatural belief presents an explanatory challenge to evolutionary theorists—it is both costly and prevalent. One influential functional explanation claims that the imagined threat of supernatural punishment can suppress selfishness and enhance cooperation. Specifically, morally concerned supreme deities or 'moralizing high gods' have been argued to reduce free-riding in large social groups, enabling believers to build the kind of complex societies that define modern humanity. Previous cross-cultural studies claiming to support the MHG hypothesis rely on correlational analyses only and do not correct for the statistical non-independence of sampled cultures. Here we use a Bayesian phylogenetic approach with a sample of 96 Austronesian cultures to test the MHG hypothesis as well as an alternative supernatural punishment hypothesis that allows punishment by a broad range of moralizing agents. We find evidence that broad supernatural punishment drives political complexity, whereas MHGs follow political complexity. We suggest that the concept of MHGs diffused as part of a suite of traits arising from cultural exchange between complex societies. Our results show the power of phylogenetic methods to address long-standing debates about the origins and functions of religion in human society.

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