

Ara Norenzayan

Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. 248 pages. ISBN: 9780691169743. € 13,77 (Paperback; reduced offer at publisher's website).

REVIEWED BY Filip Uzarevic, UC Louvain.

Big Gods, by Ara Norenzayan, is an ambitious, comprehensive and well-delivered project tackling several fundamental questions for the social sciences. How did human communities develop from small groups of hunter-gatherers toward the enormous societies we live in today? Large-scale societies require trust and collaboration between large numbers of anonymous strangers, which is a very risky endeavor. What made this possible? Parallel with this, Norenzayan focuses on a major puzzle in the study of religion: out of a vast number of religions that existed throughout history, and those that are currently present, “just a handful of religions claim the vast majority of religious minds in the world” (p. 2). What made these religions so successful?

Norenzayan tackles these questions, firstly, by noticing that the most successful religions on the cultural market assemble around Big Gods, i.e. “powerful, omniscient, interventionist, morally concerned gods” (pp. 8-9), that demand prosocial and moral behavior from their adherents. In Norenzayan’s view, the answer to the above-mentioned puzzles is that “[p]rosocial religions, with their Big Gods who watch, intervene, and demand hard-to-fake loyalty displays, facilitated the rise of cooperation in large groups... In turn, these expanding groups took their prosocial religious beliefs and practices with them, further ratcheting up large-scale cooperation in a runaway process of cultural evolution” (p. 9).

In order to argue for this position, Norenzayan draws evidence across multiple disciplines, centering on cognitive, evolutionary and social sciences. One of the central ideas in Norenzayan’s argumentation is a well-known finding that people behave better, in terms of higher prosociality and moral behavior, when they think that they are being watched. Extending this observation to the realm of religion, he first explains how human minds have a proclivity to believe in supernatural watchers, such as gods and other agents, and secondly how Big Gods in particular (more than other, less omniscient and morally engaged forms of supernatural beings) evoke a strong feeling of surveillance, which in turn enhances suppression of selfish impulses and increases prosociality.

The next step in Norenzayan's argumentation is that sharing beliefs in Big Gods consequentially increases trust among fellow believers (even when it comes to complete strangers) through the feeling that everyone is being watched by the deity. In other words, people tend to "trust people who trust God" (p. 59). In Norenzayan's view, this mechanism, which can enhance trust even among anonymous and unfamiliar people, enabled the large-scale cooperation that served as a basis for the societies we know today. On the other hand, this also explains why atheists seem to be one of the most disliked groups, and why *distrust* in particular seems to best explain prejudice against non-believers: if belief in supernatural surveillance is what keeps us in line, how can we trust people who believe that they are not being watched? One of the other issues Norenzayan discusses is the role of religion in conflicts and inter-group competition. He concludes that societies gathering around Big Gods were historically at an advantage (among other things, due to higher cohesiveness) compared to other groups, and thus became dominant with time.

Norenzayan additionally explores various implications of the above theses. For example, if adherence to Big Gods is a signal of trustworthiness (and thus a desirable feature), how does one prevent people from faking these beliefs for the sake of self-enhancement? The answer suggested by Norenzayan is that "[r]eligious actions speak louder than words" (p. 95): in order to prevent religious hypocrisy, Big Gods religions support extravagant, religiously motivated behaviors that signal a hard-to-fake devotion to the beliefs of the religious group. Another noteworthy implication elaborated in the book is that, if Big Gods religions help in maintaining large societies because people feel that they are being monitored, then secular monitoring systems may have the same effect on prosocial behavior and cooperation. Thus, in societies with strong and stable governments, the role of religion in ensuring mutual trust, cooperation, and fairness may become superfluous.

Big Gods tackles many questions and aims to collate evidence from several disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, and evolutionary sciences, into a single unifying theory. Although this theory is essentially consistent and persuasive, there are a few voids, especially in the delivery of the ideas. For example, when discussing how religion leads to prosocial and moral behavior, Norenzayan suggests that this relationship is best explained through supernatural monitoring. People who are religious tend to feel that they are being watched by God, and thus behave in a prosocial and moral manner. The main alternative explanation for the link between religion and prosociality, which he takes into account (and dismisses) is the *ideomotor* account: i.e., that there may be an automatic (stereotype-based) relationship between religion and prosocial behaviour. Since religion is associated with concepts of benevolence, fairness, etc., activating religious thoughts may automatically activate behaviour that is consistent with these concepts.

One of the arguments whereby the ideomotor explanation is dismissed is that the priming of religious ideas (i.e., experimentally inducing thoughts about God and religion) does not lead to prosocial behaviors among atheists. Norenzayan considers this an argument in favor of the supernatural monitoring hypothesis, because "everyone, including nonbelievers, is aware of (though does not necessarily endorse) the association between religious concepts and benevolence" (p. 43). However, this may be a somewhat simplified conclusion, as religion is far too complex an entity to

say that all people have a generally positive stereotype of it. It is very possible that an atheist's first association with religion is not positive, in fact (e.g., religion may be associated with anti-intellectualism and religious aggression).

In addition to this, the argument focuses exclusively on the ideomotor account as an alternative explanation to supernatural monitoring. Although it is mentioned that religious people may act prosocially as a consequence of sincere feelings such as empathy, nevertheless this (pertinent) alternative explanation is not well-elaborated. This is especially important given that religion's relationship with higher prosociality may be indeed be partially explained through a feeling of connectedness with fellow believers and the emotion of love, for which there is empirical evidence (Van Cappellen, Saroglou and Toth-Gauthier 2016).

Another potential shortcoming of *Big Gods* is its occasional tendency to stray into speculation. For example, when discussing an experiment showing that Christians, when primed with thoughts of God, were more generous towards other Christians than towards a Muslim or a person with an unknown affiliation, he concludes that "making supernatural monitoring salient does lead to a discriminant form of generosity that is sensitive to group boundaries" (p. 161). However, how do we know that this effect is due specifically to supernatural monitoring, and not some other aspect of God-related thoughts? Perhaps thinking about God among Christians may lead to a feeling of superiority or entitlement, compared to other groups, because they feel they belong to the "right" religion. This would also likely reflect in selective generosity towards other members of the ingroup.

In a similar manner, when discussing atheism and prejudice towards atheists, Norenzayan claims that believers are more prejudiced towards non-believers than vice versa. He explains this by stating that mutual prejudice between religious and non-religious people is "not an ingroup-outgroup antagonism analogous to ethnic divides or clashes between different religious denominations. Most atheists do not see themselves as a 'group', nor do they see themselves having a 'worldview in opposition to religious groups'" (p. 83). Although it is a legitimate hypothesis that atheists do not see themselves as a group, Norenzayan does not offer empirical data supporting this claim. This is especially relevant in the light of recent research that suggests, somewhat contrary to what Norenzayan claims, that group identification with atheism does play a role among atheists: When they are faced with anti-atheist prejudice, group identification with atheism reduces the negative effect of discrimination on their well-being (Doane and Elliott 2015).

However, despite minor drawbacks, that are arguably unavoidable when a book has a scope as large as *Big Gods*, Norenzayan presents an empirically grounded, coherent and overall persuasive attempt to solve some of the great puzzles in the social sciences. Drawing from several disciplines, he skillfully describes the interplay between the origins of religion and society, toward the form we know today.

REFERENCES

- VAN CAPPELLEN, Patty, Vassilis Saroglou, and Maria Toth-Gauthier. 2016. "Religiosity and prosocial behavior among churchgoers: Exploring underlying mechanisms." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26 (1): 19-30. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2014.958004>.
- DOANE, Michael J., and Marta Elliott. 2015. "Perceptions of discrimination among atheists: Consequences for atheist identification, psychological and physical well-being." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7 (2): 130-141. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/rel0000015>.
-