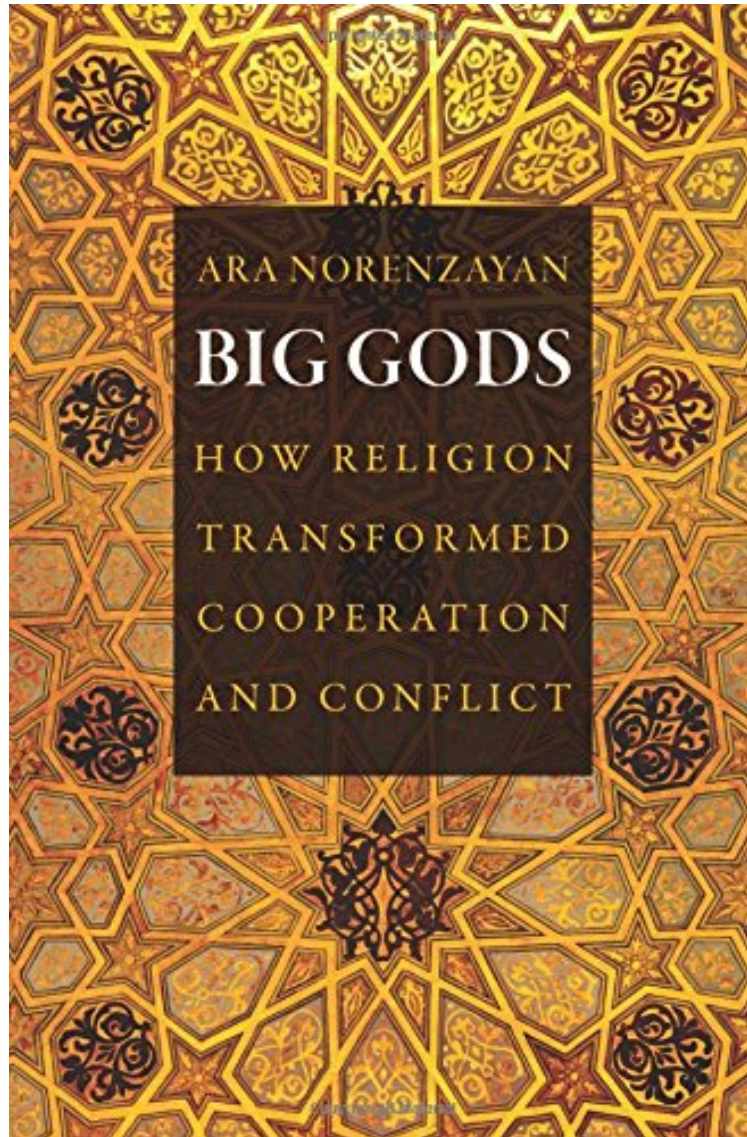


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Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict

Ara Norenzayan

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Ara Norenzayan : Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict:

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Good book with some limitsBy E. N. AndersonThis is a very rare book: a popular book about religion that actually builds on Durkheim's and Weber's demonstrations that religion is

about society, morality, and solidarity--not a failed attempt to explain the universe, not the result of eating funny mushrooms. Norenzayan (a psychologist) builds on his and others' studies of religion to show how it creates and maintains social solidarity and morality. Big societies create big gods (universal, powerful, omniscient ones) not only because the societies are big but also, more to the point, because they have to integrate vast numbers of people who don't know each other. People in such societies need a big god to unite them, watch them, and scare them with divine sanctions--the studies show all these things are important. However, Norenzayan is seriously wrong in maintaining that moral gods did not exist before big societies (civilized, state-level ones) arose. He draws on a very thin anthropology, mostly the San and Hadza who are all too familiar to anthropologists working on social evolution. The San and Hadza are very simple groups without moralizing gods. They are, however, not some arrested dawn-age people. They are relict societies--tiny groups pushed into the rocks by agricultural people. The San, at least, had far more extensive and complex societies earlier, as we know from their extensive rock art (some of which I have examined in Botswana). Of groups less relictive--notably the Australian Aboriginals and the North American Native peoples--many or most have highly moralistic religions in which spirits enforce the rules by divine punishment. Norenzayan's only real evidence on the subject is Christopher Boehm's survey of 18 "foraging" societies (see p. 126) that showed little moralizing in their religion. Several of these are part-societies or refugee societies. Others were just plain badly described; ethnographers are strangely uninterested in morals and ethics, and rarely bother to investigate these. (The only really good, thorough account I know of that describes a small-scale society's ethics was done by an ethical philosopher: HOPI ETHICS by Richard Brandt.) Today we are getting more and more accounts by Native American and Aboriginal Australian anthropologists, and they invariably emphasize the ethical and moral side of their cultures, including their religions. (See e.g. the works of Richard Atleo, a Nuuchahnulth anthropologist.) Earlier autobiographical accounts such as those of the Sioux thinkers Black Elk and Lamé Deer do the same. Norenzayan's anthropology gets him in trouble in regard to world religions too. Like almost all writers on world religion, he knows the Abrahamic ones and not the others. There are two pages (fortunately very accurate, thanks to a helpful colleague) on China, a few odd bits about "Hinduism" (a religion invented by British colonialism), and essentially nothing about Buddhism--a polytheistic religion which elevates an enlightened human (the Buddha) over all the gods. Having spent many years in polytheistic societies, I find this a serious lack. A final bit of oddness is Norenzayan's idea (p. 191) that "science" is strictly from the ancient Greeks through the medieval Muslims to the modern west. This is so hopeless it defies comment. Suffice it to say that China not only kept up with the west, but was influenced by it, up until the late middle ages (if not later). Greece was not isolated or alone. And of course the Maya developed highly sophisticated math, astronomy, and agriculture and architecture without the Greeks. All this does not really devastate the main message of the book, though. I wish Norenzayan had done his anthropological homework, but he's still basically correct, with the qualification that it's only the morals for large-scale, complex societies that had to be watched over and enforced by large, complex gods. Durkheim pointed out that the pantheon of a society usually replicates the authority structure of that society pretty faithfully, and enforces its morality in about the same way the real-world pantheon does--but with more supernatural power. As Norenzayan correctly and insightfully points out, it can do this by engaging people's intuitions, emotions, and needs for solace, security, support, and a sense of control. The very real congregation does this more than the imagined gods do; what matters is that it gets done. Norenzayan also correctly points out (again on the basis of many scholarly studies) that religion both unites and divides, and that as an expression of the total society it is pretty well bound to have the same mix of love, help, cruelty, and harm that society does. (Incidentally, I wonder why all the people who dump on religion for starting fights don't dump on sex, money, and other much commoner reasons for fights. The early Christians did indeed dump on sex for exactly that reason. And of course G. W. Bush's "crusade" in Iraq was really over oil, not faith--just as the original Crusades were over loot more than over religion.) Norenzayan asks, finally, whether we can live without religion. I doubt it. Something has to link solace, support, and respite with social morality. Communism and fascism, the modern substitutes for religion, do the opposite. Labor unions and similar secular societies did the job--copying religion quite consciously--but are not flourishing today.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Excellent compendium of research on religion
By Lane
This is an exceptional book that brings together and analyzes a large amount of research on the topic of religion. It is well written even if sometimes redundant, and a surprisingly easy read for such a complex topic. I am recommending it to all my friends interested in the ways that religion and religious people have and are influencing our world...a condition of real mystery to many of us!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A scientific investigation neither "for" or "against" religion
By Paul Beier
This is the first time I encountered a scientific investigation of religion based not on interpretation of religious texts, but rather on contemporary studies of human behavior and interpretation of well-documented historical evidence. The book is neither "for" or "against" religion -- just a fascinating account of how religion (probably) evolved and its good and bad effects on human behavior and societies.

How did human societies scale up from tight-knit groups of hunter-gatherers to the large, anonymous, cooperative societies of today even though anonymity is the enemy of cooperation? How did organized religions with "Big

Gods"the great monotheistic and polytheistic faithsspread to colonize most minds in the world? In *Big Gods*, Ara Norenzayan makes the surprising argument that these fundamental puzzles about the origins of civilization answer each other.Sincere faith in watchful Big Gods unleashed unprecedented cooperation within ever-expanding groups, yet at the same time it introduced a new source of potential conflict between competing groups. And in some parts of the world, societies with atheist majoritiessome of the most cooperative and prosperous in the worldhave climbed religion's ladder, and then kicked it away.Big Gods answers fundamental questions about the origins and spread of world religions and helps us understand the rise of cooperative societies without belief in gods.

From Publishers WeeklyWhy did Christianity and Islam flourish while other faiths faded into obscurity? What binds complex societies together and enables strangers to live cooperatively within them? Norenzayan, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, claims that these two questions answer each other. Religions that have omniscient "Big Gods" who monitor and punish adherents for moral transgressions gave rise to large-scale societies of strangers out of small groups of related hunter-gatherers. Ranging across quantitative studies, historical cross-cultural examples, theological texts, and the practices of believers, Norenzayan convincingly argues that religions with Big Gods are successful because they generate a sense of being watched and regulated, require extravagant displays of commitment that weed out religious impostors, and encourage solidarity and trust. While the author only briefly sketches why Big Gods incite war and violence, he speculates that we may be on the verge of cooperative societies without God. Prosperous and peaceful Scandinavian countries with a majority of atheists rely on secular institutions to enforce cooperation. They "climbed the ladder of religion, and then kicked it away," he writes. "Ranging across quantitative studies, historical cross-cultural examples, theological texts, and the practices of believers, Norenzayan convincingly argues that religions with Big Gods are successful because they generate a sense of being watched and regulated, require extravagant displays of commitment that weed out religious impostors, and encourage solidarity and trust."--Publishers Weekly

"I found this book insightful, well-written, and to the point."--Tyler Cowen, *Marginal Revolution*

"The book is a breakthrough, and will undoubtedly influence scientific perspectives on religion and secularism. . . . Without a doubt, *Big Gods* is a seminal and outstanding book, rocketing the psychological and evolutionary understanding of faith and secularization to new heights and new questions. I strongly recommend it to anyone interested in human evolution, psychology, and the scientific study of religion."--Michael Blume, *Evolution: This View of Life*

"Once in a while, a whole field of research is pushed forward by a seminal work. Ara Norenzayan's *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* is one of those rare books bound to becoming a classic for a generation of colleagues and students."--Michael Blume, *SciLogs*

"This is an impressive work; it demonstrates how and why the Big Gods are still with us, and watching."--Reference Research Book News

"I recommend it to readers interested in the relationships between religions, the non-religious, and nation states. It should be required reading for psychologists and sociologists."--John Harney, *Magonia*

"[T]his book is great value for the money: it provides energy, intriguing ideas and a joyous display of a fine mind, one that swoops and soars and frequently stops to preen, like some brightly coloured bird in an Edenic rainforest."--Donald Harman Akenson, *Literary of Canada*

"Norenzayan weaves in one convincing scientific study after another, leaving me (as a study junkie) highlighting about every page. . . . His thesis is fascinating and well worth a read (or two). Norenzayan is not prescribing a way to end religion or to suggest that one form of thinking over another is better, but to get at the underlying factors that bring a society from big gods to secularity. I'm sure any deeply held convictions about the nature of religion and disbelief will be challenged tremendously by *Big Gods*, and as any analytical thinker would probably say, why shouldn't they?"--Brandon G. Withrow, *Discarded Image*

"Ara Norenzayan's study *Big Gods* is an interesting study worthy to read."--Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, *Metapsychology*

"Norenzayan analyzes religion primarily as a mechanism for enforcing social cooperation, a problem for which the evolution of increasingly more powerful gods provides a solution in increasingly large and complex societies. . . . With consistently clear organization and thorough documentation, this book combines explanations for cognitive belief in supernatural entities with social explanations of religion's function, advancing readers' understanding of how the former serves the latter."--Choice

"Norenzayan's book provides the best collection and dissemination of research regarding religion as a cultural adaptation for prosociality and cooperation among groups. It sets forth an important agenda for research among psychologists, religious scholars and historians."--James A. Van Slyke, *Philosophy, Theology, and the Sciences*

"Ambitious, comprehensive and well-delivered. . . . 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."--Filip Uzarevic, *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*

From the Back Cover"People love origin stories, and this is ours--a fascinating and accessible account of how Big Gods helped us make the leap from hunter-gatherers to gigantic and religiously diverse societies. But this book is not just about the past. Norenzayan gives us a nuanced account of secularism, and offers us some surprising tools we can use to create more ethical organizations and societies going forward."--Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*

"Does God make us good? In this fascinating new book, Ara Norenzayan explores how the invention of

Big Gods--powerful and omniscient moralizing deities--has transformed the world. Replete with insights about morality, cooperation, faith, atheism, and much more, Big Gods will change the way we think about human nature and human society."--Paul Bloom, author of *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*"Of all the topics forbidden debate in polite company, religion is the last taboo. This brave, lucid, balanced blend of compassion and science tackles our most cherished values and most intractable disputes. Big Gods sheds light on the cultural evolution of sacred watchers who arguably make us better humans. And it opens the door to explain how and when secular institutions can do the same. For all of us who worry about the role of religion in the modern world, this is a must-read, original milestone."--Susan T. Fiske, coauthor of *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture*"In this bold and important work, the brilliant young social scientist Ara Norenzayan offers a profound new perspective on religion and atheism, arguing that some gods were more effective than others at promoting trust and cooperation among strangers. The rich narrative ranges all over the world, covering not only religious people and the difference between big and little gods but also the puzzling durability of widespread prejudice against atheists. Packed with information extending from international social trends to findings from scientific experiments, this deeply thought-provoking book will change the way you understand the connection between religion and social life."--Roy F. Baumeister, coauthor of *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*"This is by far the most accessible and comprehensive synthesis of the new social and cognitive science of religion. Ara Norenzayan combines ingenious cross-cultural experiments and judicious historical analysis to give an original evolutionary account of the civilization-creating idea of Big Gods. He also provides a compelling exploration of the ongoing global competition for humanity's heart and mind between the monotheisms and various forms of atheism that represent God's secular offspring, including the great ideologies of the modern era and perhaps science itself."--Scott Atran, author of *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*"In a time of heated debate about the origin and function of religion, Ara Norenzayan provides a much-needed, well-written argument based on extensive research. The data reveal how religion impacts human behavior. His view that an omniscient God is our own creation designed to deal with the problem of freeriders deserves much more attention. It brings faith closer to where Darwin thought it belonged, in the sphere of social life and cooperation."--Frans de Waal, author of *The Bonobo and the Atheist*"This is a terrific book. Authoritative, clear, and written in a straightforward, entertaining style, it deals with a problem of great interest to a wide range of general readers and academics, including psychologists, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists."--Robert Boyd, coauthor of *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*