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The Big Gods of Exploitation?

A Review of Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict by Ara Norenzayan (Princeton University Press, 2013)

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In the last decade, there has been a flurry of books by noted academics and intellectuals that use supposedly rational argumentation to dispose of religion as a backward and dangerous idea (see Harris 2004; Dawkins 2008; Hitchens 2008). Among the considerable attention these authors and their ideas have garnered, important scientific work on the evolutionary and cognitive roots of religion has been overlooked in popular discourse. This is beginning to be remedied with two recent publications that compile and synthesize some of the main concepts to emerge from this paradigm. Ara Norenzayan's *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton University Press) and Dominic Johnson's *God is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (Oxford University Press) tackle a fascinating commonality among the world's large-scale religions: gods' and spirits' inordinate concern with human moral behavior.

At first glance, the connection between gods and morality may seem obvious. However, this is only because deities that enforce ethical codes are central in the world's major religions. From the perspective of evolution, this is baffling: why do humans hold strong beliefs about supernatural beings that not only tell us what to do (or not to do), but punish us if we misbehave? This is the question that these authors attempt to answer and although their conclusions are similar, there are significant differences in the mechanisms thought to be operating in the process. Both volumes are lucid, persuasive, and exhaustively researched. They both draw from a rich inter-disciplinary literature that makes their work relevant for scholars in anthropology, economics, psychology, and religious studies, to name a few areas. Here, I will focus on Norenzayan's volume but will also reference Johnson's work albeit more generally (for a more detailed review of Johnson's book, see Soler forthcoming).

Norenzayan and Johnson each present a three-part argument. The first is that humans have evolved cognitive mechanisms that have been co-opted by religion and now underlie religious belief and behaviors. The second is that some of these mechanisms have made belief in moralizing gods and supernatural punishment prevalent across societies. And third, these beliefs are widespread because they

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represent a solution to the classic Darwinian puzzle of cooperation. More specifically, in ancestral environments the reliance on supernatural beings that interfere in human affairs would have fostered intra-group cooperation and allowed some groups to outcompete others. While there is a vast literature that examines mechanisms through which individuals are willing to help others at a cost to themselves (e.g., reciprocity, kin selection, costly signaling), moralizing gods and supernatural punishment represent an alternative and novel explanation. Rather than group members monitoring each other to ensure that free-riders are punished and cooperators are rewarded, these tasks are outsourced to deities providing an otherworldly motivation for humans to behave prosocially.

At this point these two accounts differ in important ways. Johnson's argument centers on belief of "supernatural punishment" and explains this as the result of genetic evolutionary pressures operating at the individual level. Norenzayan, on the other hand, focuses more broadly on deities which punish and are involved in the minutiae of daily life (their relative omnipresence is the reason why he refers to these as "big gods"). In his view, big gods represent a complex interaction of genetic and cultural evolution that can be summarized as follows: 1) humans have an evolved suite of adaptive cognitive tendencies (for example, hyper-vigilance of agents in the environment to detect potential predators and enemies), 2) some of these tendencies give rise to idiosyncratic ideas (evolved hyper-vigilance might explain why we tend to perceive human and animal forms in inanimate objects), 3) some of these ideas or "cultural variants" spread in a population through various mechanisms (if the carrier of the idea is a prestigious individual or if the idea is memorable or helpful in some way). Through such a process, moralizing gods have emerged as particularly successful cultural variants because they serve to police social behavior in large stratified societies where inter-personal monitoring is not feasible.

Norenzayan helpfully provides a list of eight principles that sum up the arguments presented in the book: watched people are nice, religion is more in the situation than in the person, hell is stronger than heaven, trust people who trust god, religious actions speak louder than words, unworshipped gods are impotent gods, big gods for big groups, and religious groups cooperate in order to compete. The first six are explanations of the cognitive machinery that makes belief in moralizing gods possible, while the latter two are concerned with the role of these beliefs in large-scale societies. Norenzayan relies on ethnographic evidence to suggest that gods that interfere in human moral behavior are rare among small-scale societies. For example, he mentions the Hadza, hunter-gatherers in Tanzania whose version of a main supernatural being is a distant god who created the world and essentially left it alone afterwards. This is quite common among other foraging groups where some gods and spirits are not only

uninterested in human affairs, but also can be rather stupid and easily tricked or duped. Big or moralizing gods, in contrast, must possess sufficient human-like characteristics so that we can clearly conceive of their motives and desires but also be endowed with superhuman powers (e.g., knowing what we think, controlling natural forces to reward or punish us). Many of the actions that please or anger big gods have to do with our behavior toward others—not surprising, since conflict in human societies is centered on breaches of the social contract. In other words, we have created gods so much in our own image that they too are highly social creatures primarily concerned with cheating, cooperation, murder, lying, and sexual fidelity.

While the logic of the main argument is clear and persuasive, evidence for each of these principles varies from solid to very scant. Much of it comes from circumscribed experimental work carried out in Western settings and, more specifically, with college students. To make inferences about human cognition at the quasi-universal scale that the book suggests requires substantially more and better cross-cultural and historical data. To his credit, Norenzayan is keenly aware of this shortcoming and dedicates various sections of the book to the problem of WEIRD (Western, Industrialized, Educated, Rich, and, Democratic) researchers and subjects in psychological research (Chapters 3 and 9 in particular). Nevertheless, the lack of systematic data from non-Western settings remains a major challenge to the “big god” hypothesis.

My main comments with the book’s arguments, however, concern the last two of Norenzayan’s principles: “big gods for big groups” and “religious groups cooperate in order to compete”. Norenzayan devotes Chapters 7, 8, and 9 to explore the notions that moralizing gods are prevalent in large-scale societies, that these gods foster intra-group cooperation, and that such cooperation is instrumental in outcompeting other groups. First, it is important to question the assumption that inter-group conflict has been prevalent in human history or that it has taken the form of distinct groups struggling for survival. In the former case, there is evidence that among hunter-gatherer groups, lethal conflict resulted primarily from inter-personal violence rather than group-level interactions (Fry and Söderberg 2013). As groups grew and consolidated into the first large-scale societies, one can question whether population densities were sufficiently high for distinct cultural groups to emerge in geographical proximity to each other. Even when this is the case, what are the roles of inter-group migration and acculturation? Do moralizing religions drive competition in the same way if group membership is somewhat fluid? If inter-group conflict does not follow the model outlined by theories of moralizing gods, the adaptive function of these ideas remains obscure.

Another crucial assumption of the big gods theory is that deities who punish and reward do so because of moral transgressions. However, even in large

stratified societies this is not always the case. In the African Diasporic religions of the Americas, for example, gods may inflict misfortune on followers because a ritual was not performed properly or a taboo was broken. These religions originated in areas of present-day Nigeria and Benin among ethnolinguistic groups organized in politically complex and populous kingdoms (e.g., the Yoruba, the Fon). There is little evidence that deities were or are conceptualized as moralizing in either Western Africa or the Americas. Moreover, the everyday experiences of devotees often interweave orthodox beliefs of moralizing gods with what might be described as transactional relationships. In these cases, the devotee performs rituals or offerings to obtain rewards from spirits or deities. Supernatural punishment is dispensed because the ritual was performed incorrectly but not because of social violations. This lack of “theological correctness” (Barrett 1999) suggests that although the ideas promoted by religious elites include moralizing deities, followers may not internalize them or invoke them in everyday life. Inevitably, much of the archaeological and historical evidence available, from monumental architecture to sacred texts, reflects the beliefs of elites rather than everyday folks. Present-day examples suggest that these can be widely different: in Thai Buddhism, for example, amulets, good luck charms and offerings that solve everyday problems are far more central to people’s lives than orthodox notions of karmic rebirth (Moro 2010). In Latin America, popular Catholicism can be described as largely consisting of transactional exchanges with gods and other supernatural beings (e.g., saints, angels, the Virgin Mary). A popular tradition in various parts of Mexico and the Caribbean, for instance, involves young women placing Saint Anthony upside down until he finds them a husband (at which point he can be set upright again!). Other expressions of amoral religiosity involve the growing worship of the Santa Muerte and the cult of Jesus Malverde, patron saint of drug traffickers (both in Mexico). Thus, the everyday experience of believers may be less centered on moralizing aspects of deities and much more concerned with deploying prayers, candles and offerings in exchange for favors or protection from misfortune.

Even if belief in moralizing gods is as widespread as Norenzayan suggests, there are other possible interpretations for their rise and characteristics. In particular, such processes may be driven by intra-group conflict and exploitation rather than cooperation (see Soler and Lenfesty 2016). When Norenzayan mentions intra-group cooperation, he has in mind a range of possibilities: management of common pool resources, reducing crime, and organizing warfare are all mentioned. Big gods are supposed to uphold norms that support these activities by punishing those that free-ride on group efforts. In this view, directives about social behavior around the world are couched in religious terms for this reason. However, when the religious codes of large-scale societies tackle social interactions, high-status groups are often asymmetrically favored over

others. In the Code of Hammurabi, it is stated that “If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public”. In Judaism, adherents are commanded to “honor the old and the wise” and “that the hired laborer shall not take more than he can eat”. Of course, highly stratified societies are characterized by inequality. Elites are expected to gain more from collective efforts. An example comes from the Inca where mit’a, a form of compulsory labor tribute for males, accumulated wealth and supported authority for centuries (e.g., Dell 2010). Such exploitative arrangements have been common throughout history. One could argue that the costs imposed by moralizing religion are offset by benefits gained from coordinated activities, but this assumption may not be met if there is significant inequality (as is the case in most large-scale societies). This raises the question of how and why non-elites subscribe to religious ideas that ultimately privilege leaders at a cost to themselves.

An alternative interpretation is that instead of promoting cooperation within groups, Big Gods are instrumental in creating and maintaining social inequality. In such a scenario, the cognitive biases that underlie religious beliefs are manipulated by elites for their own advantage (see Soler et al. 2014). In the natural world, there are many examples of exploitation of receiver psychology (i.e., Guilford and Dawkins 1990; Endler and Basolo 1998). These occur in the context of arms races between predator and prey, males and females, parents and offspring, and other dyads with inherent conflicts of interest. In stratified societies where high status positions conflate economic, political, and religious authority, a similar process may operate where elites take advantage of existing cognitive biases to promote religious systems that disproportionately benefit them. Such a dynamic is not sustainable over the long term since the manipulated party is expected to develop defenses against exploitation. In the case of moralizing religions, this might take the form of schisms, apostasy, millenarian sects, disbelief, and atheism.

A subset of intra-group conflict concerns sex and gender differences. Norenzayan obliquely touches on this issue when he discusses the fertility rates of moralizing religions as a crucial factor in their successful expansion. He argues that these systems encourage high levels of reproduction which in turn has given them a demographic advantage. However, the evidence for what he calls this “pronatalist” orientation is inadequate as it rests on a comparison between religious and secular societies. We do not know if moralizing religions promote fertility to any greater extent than non-moralizing ones, which is the relevant juxtaposition. The demographic explosion associated with moralizing religion might be explained by myriad other factors that have nothing to do with belief. What is clear is that contemporary moralizing religions are remarkably uniform in their condemnation of female sexual infidelity and far less punitive of male

promiscuity. As a result, reproductive success in these groups is expected to favor males since it removes choice for females. Rather than pronatalist, these norms may be better understood as expressions of inter-sexual conflict.

Possible answers to some of the arguments presented above are that cooperation and conflict can coexist within a group or that ethnographic exceptions do not invalidate the main theory. However, moralizing gods and their role in intra-group cooperation are presented as an inevitable development of stratified societies rather than one of various possible outcomes. For example, Norenzayan states, “supernatural agents of large societies around the world do double-duty as supernatural watchers” (p. 23) and later, “In the next chapters, I explain how prosocial religious groups spread around the world and came out on top in the intensifying intergroup struggle that has shaped human history” (p. 148). This echoes Johnson’s more uncompromising view that supernatural punishment is a universal human trait because it is genetically evolved. The problem is that while Norenzayan implicitly makes similar assumptions, there are contradictory pieces of evidence even within the book. In Chapter 7, for instance, he argues that in chiefdoms (he discusses ethnographic evidence from Fiji) the process by which supernatural beings become moralizing is just begun: “These then, are “intermediate” deities that have not yet fully transformed into Big Gods” (p. 123). The argument is that if these groups had grown sufficiently complex without the intervention of colonizing forces, these amoral gods would eventually have become similar to the deities we find in world religions. On the other hand, a few pages later, Norenzayan relies on archeological evidence from the famous site of Çatalhöyük to suggest that big gods likely predated population growth and complex societies. The timeline of the origin of big gods in relation to stratification is thus unclear.

The advantage of framing the discussion of moralizing gods in terms of cultural evolution is that such exceptions are not a fatal flaw: there are geographical regions where alternative religious variants may have become successful or where the processes that lead to moralizing religions take different paths. However, this also means that ideas or evidence that do not fit the theory can be easily dismissed rather than discussed as alternative interpretations to the available data. The big gods theory is represented as an all-encompassing “grand theory” and its proponents should take care to avoid this pitfall. Norenzayan’s account is particularly valuable because it does strive to incorporate and interpret ethnographic evidence with caution and interdisciplinary breadth. His volume is sure to inspire debate for years to come across academic fields. The ideas presented here are a result of that dialogue and my hope is that they will inspire further discussion on this important topic.

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