Ara Norenzayan


I am not in a position to assess the contribution of *Big Gods* to cognitive psychology. I am in a position to evaluate the contribution of the book to the study of religion. The problem that Ara Norenzayan announces is not that of explaining religion itself. The problem is much narrower: that of explaining the emergence and eventual dominance of ‘prosocial’ religion, which espouses the existence of ‘Big Gods.’ Gods are big because they are the gods of big communities rather than of the small foraging and hunter-gatherer communities that preceded them. Just as important, gods are big because they enforce morality rather than, as in earlier cultures, are indifferent to it: “A startling fact about the spirits and deities of foraging and hunter-gatherer societies is that most of them do not have wide moral concern” (p. 7). Few of these societies “reveal supernatural sanctions for lying, stealing, disrespect to elders, adultery, fighting, or cheating” (p. 127).

According to Norenzayan, Big God religion, which has almost replaced altogether what might be called ‘little god’ religion, is amazingly successful in getting adherents to practice morality: “Close to all of humanity – indeed, it is safe to say more than 99.9 percent – lives in very large-scale communities of anonymous strangers. Total strangers regularly depend on each other for livelihood, economic exchange, shelter, and defense ... [T]his feature of modern societies is a remarkable development that begs for an explanation” (p. 4). The emergence of the idea of Big Gods is the cause rather than the consequence of the increased size of communities. Norenzayan considers no other possible cause of increased size.

Norenzayan contends that morality, at least in the form of cooperation, is genetic (pp. 4–6). He accepts the by-now conventional line that humans are by nature altruistic rather than, as assumed by Darwin, self-centered. But for him innate cooperative inclination in humans can explain cooperation only among “kith and kin” and not among strangers, who constitute everyone else in a Big God society (pp. 6–7). Wide-ranging cooperation can only be the work of religion—better, of Big God religion, which in secular society has been succeeded by policing: “How did human societies find effective ... punishment mechanisms before the emergence of effective modern institutions such as police and courts? Was belief in supernatural policing an early social tool that provided a solution?” (p. 6).

Norenzayan does not call policing or other secular institutions secular religions, but he does stress the continuity between prosocial religion and its secular
successor: “Secular sources of authority are a continuation of prosocial religions by other means” (p. 174). Whether secular “sources of authority” actually constitute religion in secular form is a long-standing topic in religious studies. The topic goes back at least to Emile Durkheim, for whom nationalism above all is a secular religion rather than a secular replacement for religion.

Norenzayan starts with foraging and hunter-gatherer societies, which have their own gods. Yet rather than seeking to account for those gods, he seeks instead to account for the emergence of Big God religion. But then what is the link between religion per se and Big God religion? If religion does not originate to enforce morality, why does it originate? Norenzayan cannot reply that he is concerned with only Big God religion and not with earlier religion. The two share the belief in gods, and in gods as personalities. Norenzayan cannot restrict himself to Big God religion since it arises after ‘little god’ religion and in response to the limitations of little god religion. Put another way, Norenzayan must offer an explanation of religion altogether and must therefore confront the scores of existing, classical explanations, not all of which even tie religion to morality. Why is his explanation of religion superior to theirs?

It is insufficient for Norenzayan to attribute religion to anthropomorphism or to some other cognitive process, which at best explains the how of religion but not the why. If he is not making anthropomorphism the source of religion, then what for him is the source? And what happens to the original need—whatever it is—once religion moves from little gods to big ones? Norenzayan is clearly not asserting that little god religion is other than religion. But since religion never arises without a need, what need did little religion arise to fulfill, and what has become of that need in subsequent religion? Origin means cause. What is the cause of religion? To offer the effect of religion as the cause would be to commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

For most theorists of religion the need that religion arises to serve never changes. But for some theorists it does. For E. B. Tylor, ‘primitive’ religion originates to explain events in the physical world. Modern religion, however, surrenders the physical world to science and functions instead to provide morality and metaphysics. For Max Weber, the emergence of priests, prophets, and theologians alters the need that religion strives to fulfill. There is, then, nothing unprecedented in Norenzayan’s maintaining that the need that religion satisfies changes.

Norenzayan does claim that prosocial or Big God religion arose “as an obscure social experiment” (p. 7) and then spread. He claims that prosocial religion has spread because of its effectiveness in ensuring morality, which is to say cooperation. In his stress on this quintessentially social function of religion, Norenzayan is close to Durkheim, who, however, would not allow for any form of religion that did not serve this function.