Big Gods: How religion transformed cooperation and conflict

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In his new book, UBC’s Ara Norenzayan explains why world religions and their secular successors continue to influence events at the dawn of the 21st century.

Ara Norenzayan’s new book Big Gods asks big questions about spirituality


Let's start with a basic question. How do you define “Big Gods?”

Big Gods are the deities of the great polytheistic and monotheistic faiths that have spread around the world in the last 10,000 to 12,000 years. These powerful “supernatural watchers” demand passionate commitment, meddle into peoples’ affairs, reward good deeds and punish acts that violate the community’s norms. This might come as a surprise to many people, but religion didn’t start this way.

As best as we can tell, among ancestral societies, and in modern hunter-gatherers today, the gods have limited knowledge and power. While some are pleased by rituals and sacrifices offered to them, most care little about how people treat each other. This is the central puzzle that I try to solve in this book: how did we get from morally indifferent gods with limited powers, to the vast majority of people today worshipping Big Gods.

How did we make the leap from hunter-gatherer gods to the religiously diverse societies we live in today?

We know that there is tremendous cultural diversity and dynamism in religious beliefs and practices in the world. Lurking underneath this diversity, there is a striking pattern. Gods play a small part in the rich and varied cooperative lives of hunting and gathering societies, but over time, as societies get larger and more complex, religion and morality become increasingly intertwined. The gods loom larger and become more interventionist.

The idea I explore in this book is whether these two developments were fundamentally related. Did cooperation among strangers intensify and expand partly because of the cultural spread of sincere faith in these Big Gods that monitor and punish wrongdoers and free riders even when no one is watching?

The book also explores the various forms of atheism. What are your insights on the rise in atheism and the large percentage of atheists in Vancouver – a city known for its spirituality?

Some societies have climbed the ladder of religion and then kicked it away, embracing secular methods of social organization. In some parts of the world, people have found effective ways to be cooperative without Big Gods. Here in Vancouver, we have one of the least religious societies in North America — almost one in two Vancouverites say that they do not belong to any religion. Yet, a growing number of the non-religious report having spiritual beliefs and inclinations.
What does Big Gods tell us about the role of religion in our society today?

Despite the massive advances of science and technology, world religions and their secular successors continue to influence events at the dawn of the 21st century. Whether it is about religious diversity, a backlash against secularism, or the global repercussions of conflict among religions, hardly a day goes by without religion making headlines. In looking at the origins and spread of world religions, Big Gods tackles these contemporary issues that are shaping events today.

What does Quebec’s recently proposed charter of values say about the separation of church and state and the ability for societies to create a tolerant atmosphere for people of different faiths?

Quebec’s proposed charter is just one example of the ongoing battle between competing visions of secularism. Separation of religion and state is, of course, an important achievement of secularism. When the state remains truly neutral in matters of faith, it promotes peaceful co-existence of different cultures and religions. But neutrality does not imply suppressing or banishing religion or, for that matter, other culturally cherished values. Multicultural civil societies thrive by accommodating the self-expression of people of different faiths, as well as of non-believers.

Ara Norenzayan is professor of Psychology at the University of British Columbia, and a co-director of UBC’s Centre for Human Evolution, Cognition, and Culture. His research has been featured on CNN and in the New York Times Magazine, the Economist, the Boston Globe, the Toronto Star, Scientific American, and New Scientist.

Author’s website

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Contact

Bonnie Vockeroth
UBC Psychology
604.822.6265
bonniev@psych.ubc.ca
@UBCPsych

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