



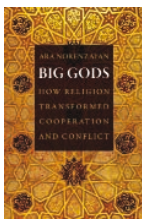
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Goodbye gods!

We may be outgrowing the need for any kind of deity, finds **Michael Bond**

Big Gods: How religion transformed cooperation and conflict

by Ara Norenzayan, Princeton University Press, £19.95, \$29.95



IN THE beginning, there were many gods. Societies entertained supernatural beings of bewildering variety. They resided in the heavens, the underworld and the forces of Earth, in things living and nonliving. They were appeased by worship, ritual or sacrifice, communicated with by oracle or divination. They harboured extreme passions, wielded extraordinary powers, and bestowed gift or punishment at will.

How, out of this pantheon, did a handful of monotheistic and polytheistic faiths come to

dominate? Ara Norenzayan's perspective is a kind of theological take on survival of the fittest. In *Big Gods*, he argues that Islam, Christianity and other world religions prospered because they had a competitive edge over their rivals. They alone offered all-knowing, interventionist deities who judged immoral behaviour, an arrangement that encouraged cooperation among large groups of anonymous strangers – because “watched people are nice people”. In short, they allowed groups to scale up: they paved the way for modern civilisation.

It is a neat, grand theory, one that Norenzayan seems well qualified to deliver. A social psychologist at the University of British Columbia, Canada, he had a hand in the experimentation and fieldwork he documents to illustrate the roots and nature of human prosociality.

He is conscious of previous attempts to explain religion in a Darwinian framework or as a by-product of human cognition and draws on them liberally. Furthermore, he grew up amid the violence and religious strife of 1980s Lebanon, curious about why a “once vibrant,

“World religions alone encouraged cooperation among large groups of anonymous strangers”

cosmopolitan society turned against itself, and imploded” over differences in ideas and outlook.

It is a convincing thesis, and whether or not you buy it, some of its implications are compelling. For example, Norenzayan asks why in religious societies atheists are so profoundly distrusted – as many surveys have shown – rather than simply disliked or

True believers think atheists cannot be expected to behave morally

ignored. The reason, he suggests, is they are considered freeriders. To the faithful, those who don't believe in divine monitoring cannot be expected to act morally.

But he also finds that prejudice against atheists diminishes in nations with strong state institutions. Police, judiciary, and the rule of law can be as effective as a supernatural power at ensuring cooperation and accountability. This explains Norenzayan's most acute observation, addressed only in the last chapter: some of the most cohesive and peaceful societies are also the least religious. In Denmark, he notes, people don't steal bicycles even – especially – when the bicycles are free to use.

Such countries, largely in Scandinavia, have passed a threshold. No longer requiring their big gods to sustain large-scale cooperative behaviour, they have effectively outgrown them. They have “climbed the ladder of religion, and then kicked it away”.

None of this explains why the US, one of the most economically developed countries in the world, is still among the most religious, where more than 90 per cent of people believe in God and close to half in a literal interpretation of *Genesis*. The US, an outlier in this, is a reminder that religion is about more than cooperation, that belief thrives perhaps because it eases deep existential anxieties where reason and logic cannot help.

The ideas in *Big Gods* resonate well beyond academic debates on the origins of religion. Think of the recent fracas over Twitter and other social media that allow users to speak anonymously, a privilege that has encouraged some to abuse whoever irks them.

This is what happens when people evade both big gods and secular eyes. If watched people are nice people, the unwatched can be the nastiest of all. ■