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STUDI E MATERIALI DI STORIA DELLE RELIGIONI

82/2 (2016)

Religion as a Colonial Concept in Modern History (America, Asia)

Dipartimento di Storia, Culture, Religioni



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

MORCELLIANA

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Note / Notes

Achilles' Historiographical Heel, or the Infelicitous Predominance of Experimental Presentism in Ara Norenzayan's *Big Gods**

«The fallacy of presentism is a complex anachronism, in which the antecedent in a narrative series is falsified by being defined or interpreted in terms of the consequent. Sometimes called the fallacy of *nunc pro tunc*, it is the mistaken idea that the proper way to do history is to prune away the dead branches of the past, and to preserve the green buds and twigs which have grown into the dark forest of our contemporary world».

David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 1971¹

Few books in religious studies and cognitive science of religion (CSR herein) have enjoyed the editorial success and the outstanding scholarly attention of Ara Norenzayan's book *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (2013)². In 2014, two academic journals have dedicated a total number of twenty-one articles to this volume (i.e., «Religion, Brain & Behavior» issue devoted to *Big Gods* was preceded by a book symposium held during the 2014 American Academy of Religion annual meeting and featured one response by Norenzayan³, while «Religion», which hosted a collection of more historiographically oriented essays, unfortunately received no feedback from the author⁴).

* I would like to take this opportunity to thank Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe for their invaluable and thought-provoking feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ D.H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Thought*, Harper Perennial, New York 1971, p. 135.

² A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, Princeton University Press, Princeton - Woodstock (UK) 2013.

³ Panel organised by the Cognitive Science of Religion Group and the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion, <https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Annual_Meeting/2014/2014AMProgramBookAARSessions.pdf> (03/2015); "Big Questions about Big Gods: Response and Discussion", in «Religion, Brain & Behavior» 5, 4 (2015), pp. 327-342, doi:10.1080/2153599X.2014.928359.

⁴ «Religion» 44, 4 (2014), pp. 592-683. ISSN 0048-721X (Print), 1096-1151 (Online); <<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rrel20/44/4>> (03/15).

Podcasts were released for *This View of Life*⁵, *Inquiring Minds*⁶ and *The Religious Studies Project*⁷. The website of the International Cognition and Culture Institute hosted *A précis of Big Gods* written by Norenzayan himself⁸. Ever since, *Big Gods* has been heavily featured on several major international newspapers⁹. Comparatively, *Religion, Intolerance, and Conflict: A Conceptual and Scientific Analysis*, an academic, multi-authored book published in the same year by Oxford University Press and focused *grosso modo* on the same general subject (i.e., the relationship between religion, violence and cooperation), enjoyed much less attention¹⁰.

In front of such overwhelming overabundance, the current review essay aims at providing a synthesis of the book's contents, highlighting the paradoxical, limited role played by historiography in such a big-historical reconstruction¹¹.

As recalled in the *Acknowledgements* (xii)¹², the central features of *Big Gods* were presented in 2008 in an article published on *Science* and co-authored with Arim F. Shariff¹³. The following one-page summary (xiii) provides the reader with eight catchy bullet points, or «principles», which recapitulate the book's central tenets. Here they are *in extenso*, with in-brackets references to the pages where the argument is further developed:

1. *Watched people are nice people* (19);
2. *Religion is more in the situation than in the person* (39)
3. *Hell is stronger than heaven* (44);

⁵ Interview hosted by Richard Sosis on December 31, 2014: <<http://evolution-institute.org/article/big-gods-how-religion-transformed-cooperation-and-conflict/>> (03/2015); audio file available at <<https://soundcloud.com/this-view-of-life/big-gods-by-ara-norenzayan>> (03/2015).

⁶ Interview hosted by Chris Mooney on December 20, 2013: <<http://climatedesk.org/2013/12/why-obamacare-could-produce-more-atheists/>> (03/2015); audio file available at <<https://soundcloud.com/inquiringminds/13-ara-norenzayan-why-do/s-GWmDG>> (03/2015).

⁷ Interview hosted by Thomas Coleman Jr. III on March 3, 2014: <<http://www.religionsstudiesproject.com/podcast/ara-norenzayan-on-big-gods-how-religion-transformed-cooperation-and-conflict/>> (03/2015).

⁸ Available online at <<http://www.cognitionandculture.net/workshops/big-gods/2568-a-precis-of-big-gods-how-religion-transformed-cooperation-and-conflict/>> (03/2015).

⁹ A list can be found on both the following websites: <<http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~ara/MediaBook.html>>; <<http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~ara/media.htm>> (03/2015).

¹⁰ S. Clarke *et al.* (eds.), *Religion, Intolerance, and Conflict: A Scientific and Conceptual Investigation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014. It is worth noting that the book includes a chapter written by Will M. Gervais and Norenzayan himself (pp. 126-145).

¹¹ For a much more comprehensive analysis, though, please refer to the systematic meta-review recently featured in «Numen» (J. Skjoldli, *The Backwash of Norenzayan's Big Gods: a Post-Review Essay*, in «Numen: International Review for the History of Religions» 62, 5-6 [2015], pp. 639-660. doi: 10.1163/15685276-12341397).

¹² Unspecified parenthetical referencing is from A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, cit.

¹³ A. Norenzayan - A.F. Shariff, *The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality*, in «Science» 322, 5898 (2008), pp. 58-62. doi: 10.1126/science.1158757.

4. *Trust people who trust in God* (59)
5. *Religious actions speak louder than words* (95);
6. *Unworshipped Gods are impotent Gods* (111);
7. *Big Gods for Big Groups* (124);
8. *Religious groups cooperate in order to compete* (147).

The first chapter, entitled *Religious evolution*, starts *in medias res* from «the dynamic process» (3), also labelled in an unfitting manner «iron law» (*sic*; 2), of cultural selection which through time has led to the differential success of certain religious packages against other religious competitors. In order to understand the presence and distribution of current religions, Norenzayan points out that *Homo sapiens* has begun organising its social life in «very large-scale communities of anonymous strangers» only during the last 12,000 years, and this societal typology now accounts for the 99.9% of all human beings on Earth (4). Thus, he advocates the study of contemporary hunters-gatherers in order to obtain «important [...] clues about human origins» (4) and because their small-scale social life is thought to retain the most basic form of social organisation based on kin and kith cooperation. Quite problematically, the equivalence between their present and our past is given for granted, and we will come back to this topic later. Anyway, these two modalities of partnership and mutual assistance are respectively described by Hamilton's rule and reciprocal altruism¹⁴ (5).

In such circumstances, the genetic and reputational benefit-to-cost ratio positively underpins social interactions based on vis-à-vis, limited relationships, keeping under control cheaters and freeriders (i.e., those who enjoy social benefits while avoiding any effortful collaborative project). Yet, Norenzayan maintains that, in the absence of third-party, reliable policing institutions to punish freeriders, the scaling-up in the interactions between potential strangers could not have taken place (6) because the bigger the community the greater the chance to revert back to mere selfish behaviours. Moreover, extensive and sustained cooperation between large numbers of non-genetically related individuals (also defined as ultrasociality) occurred just once in primates, seemingly within our *taxon*, an occurrence which constitutes a radical change from «small, tight-knit groups (*Gemeinschaft*, or community) to large, anonymous society (*Gesellschaft*, or civil society)» (6).

¹⁴ W.D. Hamilton, *The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour. I*, in «Journal of Theoretical Biology» 7, 1 (1964), pp. 1-16. doi:10.1016/0022-5193(64)90038-4; Id., *The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour. II*, in «Journal of Theoretical Biology» 7, 1 (1964), pp. 17-52. doi:10.1016/0022-5193(64)90039-6. On reciprocal altruism cfr. R. Trivers, *The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism*, in «The Quarterly Review of Biology» 46, 1 (1971), pp. 35-57. doi:10.1086/406755. Other references are provided in A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, cit., p. 194.

The «double conundrum» of the emergence of «large cooperative groups» (6) is resolved by building on the causal correlation between large-scale cooperation and «prosocial religions with Big Gods» (7-8), the latter considered as outsourced agents of internalised policing. The deep-historical background suggested by Norenzayan offers a middle ground, or a third way (10), between two classical theories in CSR, namely religious beliefs and behaviours as by-products or adaptations, and could be summarised as follows: standard everyday cognitive mechanisms enable the formation and spread of specific by-products (like mind-body dualism), which in turn allow further and properly religious elaborations. The latter are co-opted and exploited in beliefs and behaviours which may favour or damage their recipients and performers. When «some early mutants» which featured «watchful Big Gods with interventionist inclinations» (8) appeared on the cultural scenario they boosted trust and cooperation and, in the long run, they basically outcompeted other less successful variants. Finally, secular societies characterised by a vast majority of atheists and agnostics, which score very high in global surveys concerning quality of life, cooperation, etc., have taken back institutional trust, substantially removing Big Gods. As Norenzayan puts it, they have «climbed religion's ladder, and then kicked it away» (9).

The second and the third chapter, respectively entitled *Supernatural Watchers* and *Pressure from Above*, describe the psychological underpinnings according to which reminders of supernatural monitoring encourage fair cooperation. Norenzayan starts from ordeals in medieval Europe, whose threat during trials was reputed efficacious to the extent that guilty parties knew that they would have been punished by an omniscient, supernatural watcher (13-14). Notwithstanding the framework recalled in the first chapter, historical documents are discarded in favour of «empirical studies from psychology, economics, sociology, and anthropology, where the actual behaviour of people can be carefully observed in everyday life under controlled conditions» (15). A brief résumé of CSR's basic tenets (theory of mind [ToM], mind-body dualism, teleological intuitions, anthropomorphism; 15-19) introduces a list of experimental findings which back up the first principle of Big Gods (19), i.e. «Watched people are nice people». Face recognition and a sensitivity to eyes are identified as fundamental mechanisms rooted in evolution for enhancing prosocial behaviours, threat detection and ingroup species-specific interactions, further exploited in human groups for «reputation monitoring» and «reputation protection» (21). Fake stimuli nonetheless trigger prosocial responses, and this finding underpins the idea that supernatural watching deities with their scrutinising eyes were co-opted in the surveillance third-party systems of past societies (23).

Notwithstanding any theological effort to impose god/s as not human-like beings with absolute omniscience, theological incorrectness is inevitable and people intuitively personify their deities as «full access social strategic agents»¹⁵ (27) concerned with morally relevant actions; thus, supernatural monitoring piggybacks on ordinary cognitive functions (26).

The end of the second chapter focuses on the dual inheritance system, genetic and cultural, which allowed human beings to successfully spread on the planet. This system is sustained by «the iron law [*sic*] of Darwinian evolution» which, according to Norenzayan, states that «when there is variation and selective retention in any entity capable of some sort of replication (even if imperfect), traits that have fitness advantages will spread at the expense of their less fit rivals» (30). Three noteworthy characteristics of cultural evolution stand out with regards to the differential spread of religious packages:

1. the successful spread of ideas is underpinned by a limited catalogue of tweaked expectations with regards to basic ontological domains;
2. the diffusion of ideas is constrained by majority opinions and the ranking status of the interacting agents;
3. weird, unexpected behaviours act as costly signalling of source reliability and help to overcome the intentional manipulation from third parties (30-32).

This general overview conducts Norenzayan to affirm that there is no need to postulate a specifically dedicated God spot in the brain (23; although a cognitive and neurological discussion of the biased tenets of the so-called neurotheology should be pertinent)¹⁶, and that there is no useful divide between cultural and religious representations (32). The third chapter explains at large the results from psychological experiments, such as those accounting for the Sunday effect, i.e. the positive incidence of religious, collective reminders like the Christian mass, on charity and avoidance of morally-laden behaviours (e.g., porn consumption; 37-38). These outcomes show that «religious reminders, or *primes*, decrease the temptation to cheat» and «increase a host of prosocial tendencies, such as generosity, fairness, cooperation, and the willingness to punish non-cooperators while incurring a cost to oneself» (34). The second principle of Big Gods («Religion is more in the situation than in the person»; 39)

¹⁵ A quotation from P. Boyer, *Religion Explained*, Basic Books, New York 2001, pp. 156-157.

¹⁶ For an in-depth, critical review cfr. A.W. Geertz, *When Cognitive Scientists Become Religious, Science Is in Trouble: On Neurotheology from a Philosophy of Science Perspective*, in «Religion» 39, 4 (2009), pp. 319-324. doi: 10.1016/j.religion.2009.08.001.

emerges from the consideration that although cherished beliefs are held in the highest regards as firm coordinates on everyday paths of life, these ideas are contextually dependent on whether they actually outcompete other concomitant, temporarily salient thoughts and behaviours.

The third principle, «Hell is stronger than heaven» (44), appears to be the discriminating factor between the supernatural monitoring hypothesis and the ideomotor account. The latter posits that the unconscious priming of concepts influences the enactment of corresponding behaviours (41). From the ideomotor point of view, thus, prosocial behaviours are expected to be correlated with God's benevolence and kindness. Yet, lab experiments demonstrate that those who believe in a vengeful God are keen to punish less («offload[ing] punishing duties to God»; 45), a result seemingly strengthened by inversely proportional national ratios between belief in Hell and crime rates (46). Therefore, Norenzayan believes that the supernatural monitoring hypothesis should be considered as a prerequisite for the ideomotor cultural associations between religious positively conceptual priming and resulting behaviour (47).

The fourth chapter (*In Big Gods We Trust*) explores the fourth principle, i.e. «Trust people who trust in God» (59), and explains the role of third-party gods as devices of reliability for merchants in ancient Greece, for Armenian silk vendors in the seventeenth century and for Muslim traders in Asia and Africa (56-59). Thus, it is startling to find the following statement about history: «History presents us with the puzzle, but the answers come to us through the recent work of anthropologists, behavioural economics, and social psychologists» (60). The «threat of religious hypocrisy» (61), which risks engulfing religious groups in the onerous vigilance to identify freeriders, is overcome thanks to the deployment of credible, hard to fake cultural devices. By the same token, «a costly and risky investment in a person or entity, with the future expectation of cooperation» (64), is elicited via the trustworthy display of belief in prosocial religiosity (even a different one) which, in turn, promotes distrust and hostility towards atheists (63). This «bounded nature of religious trust» (63) is evident in the poll results that highlight how freethinkers are perceived by believers as potentially dangerous free-riders (71).

Norenzayan concedes that «there are multiple motivations and reasons to be nice and to do good» (72; cfr. p. 32), because the mere act of surveillance causes nice behaviours, whether religion is present or not. On the contrary, «[i]n a society where the rule of law is weak, and overall levels of trust and cooperation among strangers are quite low (that's indeed most people for most of history), credible signals of fearing a god are, and have been, the only game in town, and in those societies, it would be reasonable to rely on such religious badges as a trust cue» (75), yet no historical data accompanies this assertion.

The fifth chapter (*Freethinkers as Freeriders*) focuses on the anti-atheist prejudice and the ways in which it can be reduced, namely:

1. «exposure to or reminders of strong institutions that create prosocial norms;
2. «exposure to or reminders of atheists' prevalence;
3. «[...] the decline of religiosity in a given society» (93).

In the wake of the general framework outlined earlier in the book (cfr. p. 7), atheism and agnosticism are strictly studied from a psychologico-experimental perspective, while no discussion of historiographical antecedents is provided. This choice suggests the unfortunate conclusion that atheism should be merely considered as a contemporary point of view *tout court*¹⁷. More on this topic in the concluding paragraphs of this essay.

True Believers, the following chapter, introduces the fifth principle of Big Gods, i.e. «Religious actions speak louder than words» (95), which revolves around the leitmotiv that in order to convince others of someone's reliability one needs to devise methods of escaping the freeriding trap. This leads to costly practices and flamboyant, if not outright odd, behaviours. The Orthodox Skoptsy, the Thaipusam festival from Mauritius and the ancient cult devoted to the Anatolian goddess Cybele, whose priests castrated themselves, are all recalled as bizarre rituals, which may have a negative impact on someone's fitness, and are explained by Joseph Henrich's CREDs, «CRedibility Enhancing Displays» (99)¹⁸. CREDs testify trustworthy beliefs and third parties may infer from them high degrees of commitment, leading to a successful spreading of behaviours and ideas. Norenzayan then highlights the compatibility between the similar theories of CREDs and costly signalling (101), the latter explaining genetically patterned performances, which consume beneficial resources and exposes the performer not only to a potential mate but also to rivals or predators, as a display of specifically exaggerated traits. Norenzayan, who favours a more cultural solution, writes that the costly signalling hypothesis may explain genetically-based cooperation but «it does not clearly expect causal effects on levels of beliefs or commitment in observers» (103). After another concise reminder of some CSR's tenets, this time focused on the spread of counterintuitive ideas, and an interesting ontogenetic take on Santa Claus (he starts as a god by all means

¹⁷ «If you are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or even an agnostic or atheist descendant of any of these traditions, you are heir to an extraordinarily successful religious movement that started as an obscure cultural experiment» (A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, cit., p. 7; my emphasis).

¹⁸ J. Henrich, *The Evolution of Costly Displays, Cooperation and Religion: Credibility Enhancing Displays and Their Implications for Cultural Evolution*, in «Evolution and Human Behavior» 30, 4 (2009), pp. 244-260. doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2009.03.005.

during childhood, becomes myth before adolescence, then a character in a folktale for adults, and finally he becomes metarepresented to next-generation children), comes the sixth principle, «Unworshipped Gods are impotent Gods» (111), or in other terms, potentially devout individuals need social proofs of engagement in order to commit themselves to that deity. Basically what makes a god a worshipped god is infantile indoctrination plus a genealogical chain of CREDs, which is clearly lacking in the Santa Claus lore (112).

Once again, history is willy nilly recalled as a major *explanandum* to face some basilar CSR arguments, yet no room is allowed for a thorough discussion. The same happens for the spread of prosocial beliefs in human history: «[h]ow this happened is a complex cultural evolutionary story» (114), but fictive kinship is the only historical mechanism briefly cited (116)¹⁹.

Chapter seven (*Big Gods for Big Groups*) invokes more directly the causal correlation between the Neolithic revolution and the emergence of Big Gods and, from a historiographico-archaeological point of view, it is the most problematic chapter of the whole book. The stunning archaeological Turkish site of Göbleki Tepe (ca. 11,000 years ago), is mentioned as a major religious site in a time of nomadic groups with no agriculture whatsoever and no sedentary habitations. Although presented with the usual, correct caveat about the tentative state of the thesis at stake (p. 119), Norenzayan's contention is that sites like Göbleki Tepe, supposedly testifying to a belief in Big Gods, helped people to gather around, urging them to become more sedentary and starting practising some form of agriculture – and not vice versa²⁰.

However, four main issues arise, which can be briefly assessed as follows:

1. the discovery of the technological know-how to process starch grains in order to obtain flour has been recently documented since the Palaeolithic from Italy to Russia (ca. 30,000 years ago)²¹,

¹⁹ On fictive kinship cfr. L.H. Martin, *Biology, Sociobiology and the Study of Religion: Two Lectures*, in «Religio. Revue pro religionistiku» 5, 1 (1997), pp. 21-35. Article Stable URL: <<http://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/124782>>; T.R. Trautmann *et al.*, *Deep Kinship*, in A. Shryock - D.L. Smail (eds.), *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present*, University of California Press, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 2011, pp. 160-190: p. 179; J. Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston - New York 2012, p. 120.

²⁰ «[...] early stirrings to worship Big Gods motivated people to take up early forms of farming, and not the other way around» (Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, cit., p. 120). Cfr. I. Hodder, *Probing Religion at Catalhöyük: An Interdisciplinary Experiment*, in Id. (ed.), *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Catalhöyük as a Case Study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge - New York 2010, pp. 1-31: p. 18.

²¹ A. Revedin *et al.*, *Thirty Thousand-Year-Old Evidence of Plant Food Processing*, in

- demonstrating a much varied diet in a time when hunter-gatherers were thought to rely mostly on meat, and should prevent any speculation about the alleged absence of any kind of proto-agricultural food processing in Göbleki Tepe (or elsewhere, for that matter) before the sedentary implementation of some cult²²;
2. despite any more or less plausible interpretation of Göbleki Tepe's impressive building as a temple²³, hosting a form of proto-shamanic religion (an unsupported thesis put forward by site discoverer Klaus Schmidt [1953-2014])²⁴, Göbleki Tepe's zoomorphic iconography displays no clear signs of Big Gods;
 3. surprisingly, given the geographico-historical context, the available archaeological record shows no presence of any Great Mother/Great Goddess depiction²⁵, which should alert any researcher about the persistence of certain disciplinary *topoi*²⁶;
 4. finally, in Norenzayan's description the Middle East is *sic et simpliciter* hypostatized as *the* cradle of agriculture (120), yet there have been multiple, independent and parallel cradles of agriculture in different times and places all over the Earth (between six and nine, maybe more)²⁷.

It is also somehow disappointing to find in the following pages a useful caveat about the tendency to extrapolate data from current hunter-gatherers (121-127), coupled with a sort of *scala religionum* whose basic, primeval steps are inferred from the Hadza in north-central Tanzania, in

«Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America» 107, 44 (2010), pp. 18815-18819. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1006993107.

²² For a broader palaeoanthropological contextualization cfr. J.J. Shea, *Homo sapiens Is as Homo sapiens Was: Behavioral Variability vs. 'Behavioral Modernity' in Paleolithic Archaeology*, in «Current Anthropology» 52, 1 (2011) pp. 1-35. doi: 10.1086/658067.

²³ Cfr. C. Renfrew, *Prehistory: The Making of the Human Mind*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London 2007, p. 147; Id., *Situating the Creative Explosion: Universal or Local?*, in C. Renfrew - I. Morley (eds.), *Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric Material and Spiritual Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, pp. 74-92: p. 90.

²⁴ J. Peters - K. Schmidt, *Animals in the Symbolic World of Pre-Pottery Neolithic Göbekli Tepe, South-Eastern Turkey: A Preliminary Assessment*, in «Anthropozoologica» 39, 1 (2004), pp. 179-218 (cfr. in particular pp. 212-214); K. Schmidt, *Costruirono i primi templi. 7000 anni prima delle piramidi*, transl. by U. Tecchiati, Oltre Edizioni, Genoa 2012, pp. 207-211 (originally published as *Sie bauten die ersten Tempel. Das rätselhafte Heiligtum der Steinzeitjäger*, Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, München 2007, 3rd edition).

²⁵ Cfr. Schmidt, *Costruirono i primi templi*, cit., p. 257.

²⁶ Cfr. P. Pisi, *Il mito della Grande Dea*, in I. Baglioni (ed.), *Storia delle religioni e archeologia. Discipline a confronto*, Alpes Italia, Rome 2010, pp. 239-252.

²⁷ Cfr. J. Diamond - P. Bellwood, *Farmers and Their Languages: The First Expansions*, in «Science» 300, 5619 (2003), pp. 597-603. doi: 10.1126/science.1078208; T.D. Price - O. Bar-Yosef, *The Origins of Agriculture: New Data, New Ideas. An Introduction to Supplement 4*, in Id. (eds.), *The Origins of Agriculture: New Data, New Ideas*, in «Current Anthropology» 52 (2011), pp. 163-174 («Wenner-Gren Symposium Supplement 4»). doi: 10.1086/659964.

particular from the absence of Big Gods and the absence of belief in an afterlife in their belief systems (122), without providing any reference to the history of worldwide atheism²⁸.

An ecological relationship between environment and religious organisation is highlighted in so far as the God of Abraham is recalled as «one of the most culturally successful of all Big Gods [...], originally a god of the desert» (129), yet the causal correlations (if any) between culturally successful moralising gods and harsh environmental conditions does not emerge clearly from Norenzayan's account. Once again, the author correctly warns the reader that «[m]onothelism and creator status are not at all necessary for supernatural monitoring, and may be historical accidents rather than critical features of Big Gods» (130), and yet he seems to prefer the aforementioned scenario.

The climate hypothesis has been recently tested against a huge dataset of 585 worldwide societies, finding a correlation between high moralising gods, a scarcity of natural resources and variable climatic conditions²⁹. Anyway, as brilliantly noted by Tom Rees on his blog *Epiphenom*³⁰, four major problems undermine this scenario, which might apply also to Norenzayan's thesis:

1. the favoured Mediterranean/Middle-Eastern cluster reflects the birth of the Abrahamic religions (and fits in the presentist bias as outlined by David Hackett Fischer's opening epigraph), yet the analysis surreptitiously rules out any geographico-historiographical cause (the intercontinental area of communication between different civilisations, the borderlands of various cultural traditions, etc.) – not to mention the problem in assessing the multiple variables which define a dataset easily prone to a subjective faith-based a priori;
2. the scenario leaves unexplained what could be labelled here as the empire paradox, defined by Nicolas Baumard and Pascal Boyer as the fact that the most successful state organisations of the past have been characterised by a seemingly lack of *stricto sensu* high moralising gods (such as the Greek, Roman, Aztec, and Inca empires, as well as the Mayan kingdoms)³¹;

²⁸ E.g., G. Minois, *Histoire de l'athéisme. Les incroyants dans le monde occidental des origines à nos jours*, Fayard, Paris 1998; T. Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, Faber and Faber, London 2015.

²⁹ C.A. Botero *et al.*, *The Ecology of Religious Beliefs*, in «Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America» 111, 47 (2014), pp. 16784-16789. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1408701111.

³⁰ T. Rees, *Hard Times, Tough Gods*, in «Epiphenom», November 13, 2014, <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/epiphenom/2014/11/hard-times-tough-gods.html>> (03/2015).

³¹ N. Baumard - P. Boyer, *Explaining Moral Religions*, in «Trends in Cognitive Sciences» 17, 6 (2013), pp. 172-180. doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2013.04.003.

3. the competing parasite burden hypothesis (which, all else being equal, posits an inversely proportional relationship between group size and cooperation in order to implicitly avoid and manage infectious diseases) might account for the negative correlation between luxuriant, resourceful environments and large cooperative groups with a high moralising deity³²;
4. finally, are high moralising gods really necessary «to deal with floods and droughts?»³³. The problem remains unanswered, and we need more historical and quantitative data to address these questions.

Let us now come back to Norenzayan's seventh chapter. After having recalled Robin Dunbar's studies with regards to the natural cognitive limits of a single, cooperative unit of people³⁴ (126), and Harvey Whitehouse's modes of religiosity³⁵ (i.e., Big Gods reportedly correlate well with doctrinal, agricultural, monotonous rituals; 131), Norenzayan picks up Robert Wright's *The Evolution of God* in order to support the moralising change (he prefers using the term «evolution», while Wright used «growth») of the Abrahamic god from a «rather quirky, temperamental, tribal war god among many, to [a] unitary, supreme, eternally watchful, and moralising deity» (133). Anyway, the identification of any god as an independent actor in an environmental network of passive historiographical subjects (along with their diachronic cultures put in the background) without providing clear methodological, sociological and historical frameworks³⁶, begs the very question of the underlying epistemic warrant. Norenzayan cautiously adds that «important details remain open to debate» (*ibidem*), yet Wright's analysis is biased in that the proposed cultural mechanism is

³² C.L. Fincher - R.Thornhill, *Parasite-stress Promotes In-group Assortative Sociality: The Cases of Strong Family Ties and Heightened Religiosity*, in «Behavioral and Brain Sciences» 35, 2 (2012), pp 61-79. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X11000021>. Cfr. L.H. Martin - D. Wiebe, *Pro- and Assortative-sociality in the Formation and Maintenance of Religious Groups*, in «Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion» 2, 1 (2014), pp. 1-12. doi:10.1558/jcsr.v2i1.1.

³³ T. Rees, *Hard Times, Tough Gods*, cit.

³⁴ R.I.M. Dunbar, *The Social Brain: Mind, Language, and Society in Evolutionary Perspective*, in «Annual Review of Anthropology» 32 (2003), pp. 163-181. doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.061002.093158.

³⁵ H. Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek 2004; Q.D. Atkinson - H. Whitehouse, *The Cultural Morphospace of Ritual Form: Examining Modes of Religiosity Cross-Culturally*, in «Evolution and Human Behavior» 32, 1 (2011), pp. 50-62. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2010.09.002>.

³⁶ For an example of how to conduct such an interdisciplinary enquiry properly, cfr. A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire: The Spread of New Ideas*, Cambridge University press, Cambridge 2013, pp. 7-10. In any case, the conflation of different religious taxa under the Abrahamic label remains problematic: see A.W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York 2012.

orthogenetically directed by a theo-teleological *a priori*³⁷. As in a previous book³⁸, Wright ascribes the modern decline of zero-sum conflicts and the existence of a moral order to a divinity *tout court*³⁹. Unwarranted apologetics aside, the topic of the diachronic change of a cultural representation, such as the idea of the Abrahamic god, should have provided the testbed for a thorough, comparative cultural phylogenetic survey and a major test for Norenzayan's claims of religious, competitive cultural evolution. Despite a burgeoning field in full bloom, no cultural evolutionary dataset and analysis (e.g., cladistics) have been provided or performed⁴⁰.

The last paragraph of the chapter is devoted to the supernatural punishment hypothesis held by Jesse Bering, Dominic Johnson and their colleagues, which posits a genetic adaptation for monitoring as a limit to selfish, group-damaging acts originated from the complex deep-historical relation between absent people as invisible agents, ToM and gossip (135)⁴¹. Norenzayan replies by noting that this mechanism is absent in small-scale societies (where Big Gods are most of the times absent), he adds the suboptimality of adaptation (137) and argues that cultural evolution is a better, overarching explanation which has tied, through historical modifications and in groups of increasing size, «synchronous movements [...], practices encouraging self-control [...], and a sense of fictive kinship [...]» (138), forming reliably strong «cultural gadgets» (137) with culturally postulated supernatural monitoring and displays of beliefs.

³⁷ Cfr. R. Wright, *The Evolution of God*, Little Brown & Co., New York 2009, in part. Ch. 20, *Aren't We Special?* This chapter also includes some fideistic and apologetic pleas to revive current world religions. For a critical framework cfr. D. Wiebe, *The Politics of Wishful Thinking?: Disentangling the Role of the Scholar-Scientist from that of the Public Intellectual in the Modern Academic Study of Religion*, in «Temenos. Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion» 41, 1 (2005), pp. 7-38.

³⁸ R. Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, Pantheon, New York 2000, pp. 319, 320, 334. Cfr. S. Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Viking, New York 2011, p. 694.

³⁹ Cfr. Wright, *The Evolution of God*, cit., in part. Ch. 20, cit.

⁴⁰ Recent explanations of religious in-group cooperation, policy and competition and evolutionary analysis of folktales through space and time have successfully applied phylogenetic systematics to cultural representations. Cfr. resp. L.J. Matthews, *The Recognition Signal Hypothesis for the Adaptive Evolution of Religion: A Phylogenetic Test With Christian Denominations*, in «Human Nature» 23, 2 (2012), pp. 218-249. doi: 10.1007/s12110-012-9138-8), and J.J. Tehrani, *The Phylogeny of Little Red Riding Hood*, in «PLoS ONE» 8, 11 (2013): e78871. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0078871. For more information on the cultural evolutionary framework cfr. A. Mesoudi, *Cultural Evolution: How Darwinian Theory Can Explain Human Culture & Synthesize the Social Science*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 2011; P.J. Richerson - M.H. Christiansen (eds.), *Cultural Evolution: Society, Technology, Language, and Religion*, The MIT Press Cambridge (MA) - London 2013.

⁴¹ D.D.P. Johnson, *The Error of God: Error Management Theory, Religion, and the Evolution of Cooperation*, in S.A. Levin (ed.), *Games, Groups, and the Global Good*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin 2009, pp. 169-180; J.M. Bering, *The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London 2013 (2011, 1st ed.).

A quotation from Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) introduces the following chapter (entitled *The Gods of Cooperation and Competition*) and precedes the eighth principle, which is «Religious groups cooperate in order to compete» (147). Darwin's quotation deserves to be recalled here *in extenso*:

«It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an advancement in the standard of morality and an increase in the number of well-endowed men will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection»⁴².

This strong relationship between warfare, gender and religious in-group prosociality is briefly assessed (142). Norenzayan, stating that primate morality precedes any kind of religion (145), and that religion is not sufficient (though held necessary) to the development of human ultrasociality (*ibidem*)⁴³, explains that «When intergroup rivalries are strong, prosocial religious groups, with their Big Gods and loyalty practices that promote social solidarity, could have a competitive edge over rival groups. And when prosocial religions outcompete or absorb other rival groups, their beliefs and practices proliferate, explaining why most people today are descendants of such groups» (143). As debatable as this assertion might be (especially considering the disturbingly soft tone about the warfare aspect and the cutting out of today's non-Big Gods devotees), this is an important passage and one could suspect a supporting, thorough examination of the historical data at hand coming through, in order to clarify any confusing conflation between biological and cultural evolution, and address more closely the implicitly religious motivations and explicitly religious violence in historical warfare.

Unfortunately, *From Religious Cooperation to Religious Conflict*, the penultimate chapter, appears to be rather focused on an apologetic plea for religion, tentatively demonstrating that «[r]eligion is an important player, but rarely the primary cause of wars and violent conflicts» (157). The available data provided comes from a non-academic, encyclopaedic volume and a BBC report which, as reliable as they may be,

⁴² C.R. Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, John Murray, London 1871, p. 166.

⁴³ Cfr. also the inclusion of Jonathan Haidt's overlapping and non-religious «moral systems» (A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, cit., p. 144; J. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Pantheon Books, New York 2012).

hardly make convincing sources⁴⁴. Again, history is largely neglected. The whole section is characterised by a myopic focus on an essentialised and cherished concept of *stricto sensu* religion as a Platonic, autonomous idea disconnected from bounded political realities, and unsupported by historiographical data and contemporary consensus, especially when dealing with Interwar fascisms and Soviet socialism⁴⁵.

Norenzayan acknowledges that «eroding the impact of religion would therefore not eliminate conflict» (158). The «social solidarity hypothesis of intergroup violence» (161) implies that the more cohesive one group is, the more this group lends toward the dehumanisation of socially unrelated people. On the contrary, the religious belief hypothesis supports the view that «something about religious belief itself causes intergroup hostility» (163). A third way to interpret the relation between religion and violence is «the creation of sacred values» (166) as (religious) rituals charge values with a kind of non-negotiability which is at odds with the WEIRD «rational actor paradigm» (166, where the acronym stands for Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic; cfr. pp. 53-54). Non-WEIRD peoples act inside a «devoted actor» framework, in which sacred values are «immune to trade-offs and seem insensitive to outcome» (167). This makes them particularly prone to the backfire effect, namely the exhibition of a harsher reaction when offered with incentives to overstep a sacred value (168), an effect which can be nonetheless mitigated with further apologies. This means that, cultural traditions notwithstanding, sacred values can be remodelled and «reframed» (168). Priming subjects with representations and ideas of death hardens a defensive and intolerant stance, yet reminders of religious compassionate teaching decrease support to violent activities. The conclusion is that, as shown by studies conducted on Muslims and Christian fundamentalists, the socio-historical context in which the priming takes place matters, a point perhaps insufficiently underscored by Norenzayan. A final, conciliatory note wishes for the «transmut[ation of] religiously motivated hostility into amity» (169).

⁴⁴ Encyclopedic volume: C. Phillips - A. Axelrod, *Encyclopedia of Wars*, Facts on File, New York 2007; BBC Report: G. Austin *et al.*, *God and War: An Audit and an Exploration*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war_audit_pdf/pdf/war_audit.pdf>, 2003 (cfr. page 1, note 1: «This article is not meant to be a piece of original academic analysis, but rather draws very heavily on the work of scholars in a diverse range of fields. All material drawn upon is referenced appropriately») (03/2015); for a critical review of this report cfr. C. Campbell, *Religious Wars and Nationalism*, in «Genealogy of Religion», n.d., <<http://genealogyreligion.net/religious-wars-and-nationalism>> (03/2015).

⁴⁵ Cfr. McCutcheon - W.E. Arnal, *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"*, Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York 2013. For a cognitive account on the same topic please refer to M. Bloch, *Why Religion is Nothing Special But is Central*, in «Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B» 363, 1499 (2008), pp. 2055-2061. doi: 10.1098/rstb.2008.0007.

Religion is a powerful tool to intensify or soften conflict (169), though it should be noted that the identification of a WEIRD rational actor operates an unwarranted *reductio ad unum* (without taking into consideration the huge variability in economic, social, a/religious status inside any given WEIRD society) and is now substituted by a bounded rationality paradigm which, as Alex Mesoudi recalls, means that the actor is «reasonably rational but operate[s] within certain constraints imposed by the limitations of human cognition and the sheer complexity of many economic choices»⁴⁶. This point could have been emphasised to highlight Norenzayan's preference for cultural constraints, leading to a more nuanced confrontation between the various behavioural patterns recalled. The WEIRD label is heuristically useful but should be sociologically used *cum grano salis*.

The conclusive chapter (*Cooperation Without God*) expands the theme of WEIRD, largely secular and contemporary societies and delves deeper into what is considered as the problematic existence and thriving of atheism, and, once again, history is somehow missing. Norenzayan stresses that in non-WEIRD societies religion is the only available cultural device which allows for (limited) trust and bounded cooperation, and conversely state authority and reliability are nonexistent, insufficient or corrupted (171). Yet, even if some secular societies managed to «play the game of cooperation without religion» (171), belief can always resurge if suppressed. The case of Eastern European Soviet socialism is raised as its fall meant for Russia a peak in increasing religiosity. «The Communist experiment [...] is a wake-up call to anyone naïve enough to believe that religion can be abolished by decree» (172), yet the overestimation of cognitive, inborn causes at the expense of historical roots leads to overlook the direct or indirect intervention of Western policy and the penetration of Christian missions and organised groups during and after the Communist era in the Eastern bloc, which paved the way for further religious revival⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Cfr. A. Mesoudi, *Cultural Evolution*, cit., p. 179. Cfr. *ibi*, p. 149: «[...] it is increasingly being recognized that people often do things not because they have calculated that the payoff of a particular choice is optimal, but simply because other people are doing it».

⁴⁷ Cfr., for instance, M. Elliott - S. Corrado, *The Protestant Missionary Presence in the Former Soviet Union*, in «Religion, State and Society» 24, 4 (1997), pp. 333-351. doi: 10.1080/09637499708431793; S. White - I. McAllister, *The Politics of Religion in Post-communist Russia*, in «Religion, State and Society» 25, 3 (1997), pp. 235-252. doi: 10.1080/09637499708431785; S. Filatov, *Protestantism in Postsoviet Russia: An Unacknowledged Triumph*, in «Religion, State and Society» 28, 1 (2000), pp. 93-103. doi: 10.1080/713694744. On the politics of religious studies during the Cold War cfr. L.H. Martin, *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: The Western Perspective*, in Id., *Deep History, Secular Theory: Historical and Scientific Studies of Religion*, pp. 22-34, W. de Gruyter, Boston - Berlin 2014 (originally published in I. Doležalová et al. [eds.], *The Study of Religion during the Cold War, East and West*, Peter Lang, New York 2001, pp. 209-223). For the historical interactions between the already established Protestant churches *in situ*, the Eastern bloc and the

As Anna Collar recently wrote, «conversion does not happen in a social vacuum»⁴⁸.

Norenzayan maintains that monotheisms, appealing to a sort of distant, watchmaker creator God, limited the scaffolding cultural availability of the sacred and the supernatural, and that by doing so, they paved the way for their own demise (173). Given that «existential security is the nemesis of religion» (186), gods and governments slightly occupy the same cultural niche (174) and they seem to stand in a reciprocal proportionally inverse relationship. Four kinds of atheism are briefly explored. Norenzayan, without taking into consideration the historiographical sources which account for worldwide atheism, disbelief, indifference and religious mockery at least from ancient Greece onwards⁴⁹, apodictically states that «Disbelief is a puzzle – historically, when people lost faith, they gravitated to new religions» (175). Then he focuses on the contemporary and unprecedented turning *en masse* toward the loss of faith. He correctly recognises that, contrary to CSR previous assumptions on the neutrality of religious ideas and intuitiveness, disbelief is wider than previously thought.

Recalling compelling research co-signed with Will Gervais, Norenzayan proposes «four types of disbelief» (177):

1. mind-blind atheism, due to cognitive deficits in computing ToM;
2. analytic atheism, encouraged by sustained critical thinking;
3. apatheism, «a feeling of indifference to religion found in places where peoples enjoy safe and secure environments»;
4. inCREDulous atheism, characterised by the absence of CREDs displays⁵⁰.

In the conclusion, Norenzayan highlights that, all else being equal, religions enjoy a simple yet effective long-term advantage with regards to secular societies with reliable democratic government: «the demographic windfall of more children» (192), while secularised societies globally

U.S.S.R., cfr. S.P. Ramet (ed.), *Protestantism and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia: The Communist and Post-Communist Eras*, Duke University Press, Durham 1992. On local religious revivals see A. A Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York 2007, pp. 321-361.

⁴⁸ A. Collar, *Network Theory and Religious Innovation*, in «Mediterranean Historical Review» 22, 1 (2007), pp. 149-162: p. 157. doi: 10.1080/09518960701539372.

⁴⁹ Cfr. G. Minois, *Histoire de l'athéisme*, cit.; L. Piccardi - W.B. Masse (eds.), *Myth and Geology*, The Geological Society, London 2007; A.W. Geertz - G.I. Markússon, *Religion is Natural, Atheism is Not: On Why Everybody Is Both Right and Wrong*, in «Religion» 40, 3 (2010), pp. 152-165. doi: 10.1016/j.religion.2009.11.003; G. Hawes, *Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014; T. Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, cit.

⁵⁰ Cfr. A. Norenzayan - W. Gervais, *The Origins of Religious Disbelief*, in «Trends in Cognitive Sciences» 17, 1 (2013), pp. 20-25. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2012.11.006>.

exhibit a comparatively lower birth rate. *Big Gods'* final, bleaker note focuses on the fact that ingroup religious tensions and outgroup violence and conflict directed towards «secular ways of life, will continue to shape the world in the coming century» (192).

In sum, *Big Gods* starts with a methodological bang and ends with a historiographical thud. It is a great book that does a marvelous job in synthesising a wealth of recent and groundbreaking psychological and experimental studies in CSR, yet it evokes a deep-historical background which is often unsupported by the available evidence. Most of the times, historiography is patently disregarded as a reliable source of data and largely ignored as a toolbox for studying real-life constraints and contingency, yet it is conveniently summoned as a *deus ex machina* mechanism when necessary. Despite the overblown assertions featured on the back cover blurbs, the deep-historical interest is limited to a thin and decorative veneer. This is *Big Gods'* Achilles' heel.

Moreover, the neglect of the ultimate causes of *Homo sapiens'* behaviour meets an outdated historico-religious framework. For instance, readers can find some *de facto* statements like the display of an outdated, naïve *scala naturæ ac religionum* in the presentation of some peoples as “living fossils” through the lenses of a paternalistic *Wunderkammer* (e.g., the Hadza, whose present is thought to equal our past)⁵¹, and the description of our primate cousins as owners of «moral vestiges» in an ascending, progressive Victorian sense where *H. sapiens* presumably occupies the top position (145). Speculative claims like the presence in Göbleki Tepe's of a high moralising *Ur-religion* (the archaeological site does not feature any kind of recognisable Big God, by the way), and the myopic focus on just one “cradle of agriculture” provincially favoured at the expense of the other six or nine (or maybe more) independent and parallel birth of agricultural technologies worldwide, raise the question of the underlying, epistemological and presentist *modus operandi*. As if that were not enough, the label of cultural evolution chosen by Norenzayan appears as a mere rhetorical artifice and not as an analytical instrument.

History is much more than projecting present data into the deep past, which is the most Whiggish mistake a researcher could do. A more attentive historiographical research could have led to an improved, nuanced and precise framework. As historian David Hackett Fischer wrote in 1971,

«A sense of time is not a simple thing. Time is something which people must painfully learn to think clearly about – something, indeed, which they must be taught. And there are many obstacles in the path of understanding it. It is difficult

⁵¹ «We must be careful in extrapolating from hunting and gathering societies of today to ancestral humans, but if these groups tell us anything, it is that *ancestral religions* did not have a clear moral dimension» (A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, cit., p. 127; my emphasis).

enough in this day and age for a person to imagine that there really was a past and that there will be a future. But even when that lesson is learned, one must master the idea that there are many different pasts and futures, and many different degrees of pastness and futurity»⁵².

The past might be a strange land, but the neglect of historiography, detrimental also to a true evolutionary perspective, risks to make that distant land unnecessarily stranger or deceptively familiar, especially with regards to the study of behaviours. The complex relationship between behaviours and beliefs, whether religious or not, is shaped by precise physical and social constraining environments. Something adaptive yesterday might be maladaptive today no matter how widespread, given that, as Paul Z. Myers once wrote on his blog *Pharyngula*, «The frequency of a phenomenon is not an indicator of its adaptive value, nor do variations reinforce that notion»⁵³. For instance, religions may continue to support high fertility rates as virtuous and righteous, as Norenzayan describes in *Big Gods*' last chapter, yet overpopulation is inversely proportional to the limited availability of natural resources, and the resulting situation will benefit no one. The extraordinary drop in birth rate in the WEIRD world is surely maladaptive from a gene-centred point of view, but this unprecedented minimising of genetic fitness is desirable in the light of current economico-environmental changes on a catastrophically polluted and overcrowded planet⁵⁴. In evolutionary biology adaptation is always something “good enough” for the moment, and not something set in stone forever. Even resilient cultural traditions like religions, do modify, overturn, accommodate or eliminate some of their faith-based contents on a historical timescale. Sometimes they fail to speciate into other belief systems and simply die off. As historians know too well, nothing in the cultural *longue durée*, not even Big Gods, really lasts forever – a fact which Norenzayan seems to be well aware of⁵⁵.

Indeed, there is always a surplus of adaptive reservoirs which accounts for a potential explosion of cultural patterns. The main evidential support to the epidemiology of alternative cultural representations in the *taxon Homo*, comes from what evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr (1904-2005) called population thinking, namely the rejection of the ancient typological thought that viewed things, living or inanimate, as a reflection of an otherworldly pure essence, and the correlated acceptance that

⁵² D.H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, cit., p. 132.

⁵³ P.Z. Myers, *No, Really, I Doubt that Religion is Adaptive*, in «Pharyngula», March 25, 2007 <<http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2007/03/25/no-really-i-doubt-that-religio/>> (04/2015).

⁵⁴ Cfr. P.J. Richerson - R. Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 2005, p. 169.

⁵⁵ «[...] history is littered with the corpses of moribund religious movements that were cultural failures» (A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, cit., p. 137).

each individual of any given *taxon* is unique. Even within low-intragroup variation, the diversity of cultural and religious patterns (including the absence thereof) is exactly what we should expect to see in an evolutionary Darwinian framework⁵⁶. The same logic of natural selection, with cooperation and competition as corollaries, applies. I quote the following three basic steps from Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd's *Not By Genes Alone*:

«people must vary because they have acquired different beliefs or values through social learning; this variation must affect people's behaviour in ways that affect the probability that they transmit their beliefs to other, and the total number of cultural variants that can exist in the population must be limited in some way»⁵⁷.

These points make clear that interpersonal difference, especially on a deep-historical timescale, should be considered the norm. To the contrary, when religion is regarded as a monolithic entity in which to believe in a binary way (yes/no), we fail to understand if, how and to what extent a coercive social control has been exercised, violently limiting the expression of doubts, dissent, criticism, or mockery. The most parsimonious way to understand the deep-historical societal framework of religious beliefs and behaviours is to leave room for disbelief *ab initio*: the palaeo-anthropological evidence gathered to reportedly demonstrate and justify

⁵⁶ What does this framework look like? Ernst Mayr deconstructed the bulk of Darwin's evolutionary theory into five strictly related assertions: 1) evolution as such; 2) common descent; 3) speciation, i.e. the multiplication of species from previous species, given the presence of individual variants in any population; 4) gradualism; 5) natural selection (E. Mayr, *One Long Argument: Charles Darwin and the Genesis of Modern Evolutionary Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge [MA] 1991, pp. 35-37). In addition to these conceptual pillars, Mayr listed several other equally important corollaries of Darwin's theory: «sexual selection, pangenesis, effect of use and disuse, and character divergence» (*ibi*, p. 35). This group of theories altogether represent what Mayr labelled as the «first Darwinian revolution» (*ibi*, 12ff.). Pangenesis was later disproved in favour of Mendelian genetics, gradualism has been flanked by evolutionarily rapid (geologically speaking) outbursts, and the study of the effects of use and disuse has since then become much more complicated and fascinating compared to a simplistic Neo-Lamarckian elaboration (cfr. epigenetics and evolutionary developmental biology). Nevertheless, sexual selection and character divergence still stand as two of the most important drives in evolutionary biology. Moreover, the original Darwinian framework has been successfully employed *in toto* to theoretically explain cultural evolution; cfr. A. Mesoudi, *Cultural Evolution*, cit. On punctuated equilibria cfr. N. Eldredge - S.J. Gould, *Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism*, in T.J.M. Schopf (ed.), *Models in Paleobiology*, Freeman, Cooper & Co., San Francisco 1972, pp. 82-115; S.J. Gould - N. Eldredge, *Punctuated Equilibria: The Tempo and Mode of Evolution Reconsidered*, in «Paleobiology» 3, 2 (1977), pp. 115-151. Article Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2400177>> (10/16); Idd., *Punctuated Equilibrium Comes of Age*, in «Nature» 6452, 366 (1993), pp. 223-227. doi:10.1038/366223a0). Further references provided in L. Ambasciano, *Tempi profondi. Geomitologia, storia della natura e studio della religione* [“Deep Times: Geomythology, Natural History and the Study of Religion”], in «Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni» 79, 1 (2013), pp. 152-214.

⁵⁷ P.J. Richerson - R. Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*, cit., p. 76.

the existence of an overarching religiosity since the very beginnings of our *taxon* so far has been proven inconclusive⁵⁸.

This is why the cultural framework investigated by Norenzayan, as well as its presentist, experimental bias centred on a plethora of psychological datasets, is still an insufficient tool to explain past behaviours. Providing a psychologico-experimental framework without historiography, which ventures to supply a deep-historical past in order to explain the ultimate roots of *H. sapiens*' societal organisation, is like trying to understand the ultimate origin of behavioural ecology without the depth of palaeontology. Thanks to the constant growth of palaeontological data, even when behaviours do not fossilise (which occurs in very rare occurrences)⁵⁹, they can be carefully inferred via the application of sound methodological tools⁶⁰. In the same way, and ethologically speaking, *H. sapiens*' real-life historical behaviours such as dynamics of social power, cross-cultural interactions, widespread or constrained sharing of beliefs (or the lack thereof), societal, familiar and sexual organisations, etc., are

⁵⁸ Cfr., for instance on the allegedly religious use of red ochre as a symbol for the afterlife, the lucid confutation provided in W. Roebroeks *et al.*, *Use of Red Ochre by Early Neandertals*, in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 109 (6) (2012), pp. 1889-1894. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1112261109. For a comprehensive account see L. Ambasciano, *Mind the (Unbridgeable) Gaps: A Cautionary Tale about Pseudoscientific Distortions and Scientific Misconceptions in the Study of Religion*, in «Method & Theory in the Study of Religion» 28, 2 (2016), pp. 141-225. doi: 10.1163/15700682-12341372.

⁵⁹ E.g., just to name a few examples, the first ever occurrence of sexual reproduction in a couple of placoderm non-tetrapod fishes from the Ordovician (J. Long *et al.*, *Copulation in Antiarch Placoderms and the Origin of Gnathostome Internal Fertilization*, in «Nature» 517 (2015), pp. 196-199. doi:10.1038/nature13825), live birth in Mesozoic aquatic plesiosaurs (F.R. O'Keefe - L.M. Chiappe, *Viviparity and K-selected Life History in a Mesozoic Marine Plesiosaur* (Reptilia, Sauropterygia), in «Science» 333, 6044 (2011), pp. 870-873. doi:10.1126/science.1205689) and mosasaurs (D.J. Field *et al.*, *Pelagic Neonatal Fossils Support Viviparity and Precocial Life History of Cretaceous Mosasaurs*, in «Palaeontology» 58, 3 [2015], pp. 401-407), or parental care in maniraptoran dinosaurs (D.J. Varricchio *et al.*, *Avian Paternal Care Had Dinosaur Origin*, in «Science» 322, 5909 [2008], pp. 1826-1828. doi: 10.1126/science.1163245), not to mention the multiple cases of predation (cfr. for instance, the world-renowned case of the two so-called "fighting dinosaurs", Z. Kielan-Jaworowska - R. Barsbold, *Narrative of the Polish-Mongolian Paleontological Expeditions, 1967-1971*, in «Palaeontologia Polonica» 27 (1972), pp. 5-13; D.M. Unwin *et al.*, *Protoceratops and Velociraptor Preserved in Association: Evidence for Predatory Behavior in Dromaeosaurid Dinosaurs*, in «Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology» 15 [suppl. 1995], pp. 57A-58A). To name just a couple of examples of hominin cultural behaviours cfr. the probable use of bird feathers for ornamental purposes and the possible selection of medicinal plants, both exhibited by *H. neanderthalensis* (resp., M. Peresani *et al.*, *Late Neanderthals and the Intentional Removal of Feathers as Evidenced from Bird Bone Taphonomy at Fumane Cave 44 ky B.P., Italy*, in «Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences» 108, 10 [2011], pp. 3888-3893. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1016212108; K. Hardy *et al.*, *Neanderthal Medics? Evidence for Food, Cooking, and Medicinal Plants Entrapped in Dental Calculus*, in «Naturwissenschaften» 99, 8 [2012], pp. 617-626. doi: 10.1007/s00114-012-0942-0).

⁶⁰ Cfr. M.J. Benton, *Studying Function and Behavior in the Fossil Record*, in «PLoS Biology» 8, 3 (2010): e1000321. doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.1000321.

much more varied, surprising, or simply unexpected, with regards to what might be ascertained today from a mere psychological test run in a lab. Would someone venture to imagine the life of a non-human animal in the wild simply judging by the desolated scenes that can be seen in a zoo cage? Would some researcher dare perchance to diachronically limit the whole range of behavioural responses exhibited by a given *taxon* by merely focusing on its currently limited habitat due to anthropogenic activities, and/or as if it were frozen in time? Lab experiments may act as a necessary springboard for a big- and deep-historical analysis, but they should do so in the context of a multidisciplinary, cohesive teamwork.

This is not to deny the importance of Norenzayan's outstanding works. Quite the opposite. There is an urgent need to test and back up these cutting-edge results via accurate historico-phylogenetic analyses. In the words of Stephen J. Gould, «If the primacy of history is evolution's lesson for other sciences, then we should explore the consequences of valuing history as a source of law and similarity, rather than dismissing it as a narrative unworthy of the name science»⁶¹. The historical patterns which have led to current behaviours and beliefs should be accounted for wherever this is possible, all the while being perfectly aware that in certain circumstances, where historical data are insufficient, any explanation remains categorically tentative and prone to future corrections⁶².

Behaviours and beliefs may vary and may become fixated according to contextually historical causes, to contingent patterns, to epidemiological spread of cultural representations and to several other causes, as Norenzayan aptly describes in his book. Culture branches out through time and, as Gould underlined, «[...] unless we wish to abandon a basic commitment to cause and natural law, branching order must arise for a reason (by a process, if you will). And that process is history, however history be made»⁶³. Without history there can be no suitable cultural evolutionary project. This is why the equivalence which synonymises some Native peoples' beliefs and behaviours of today with our own past appears to be supported only by an aprioristic, simplifying mindset which willfully ignores that we do not possess any kind of supporting palaeoanthropological evidence. As far as we know, the *taxon Homo*, with its plural forms of

⁶¹ S.J. Gould, *Evolution and the Triumph of Homology, or Why History Matters*, in «American Scientist» 74, 1 (1986), pp. 60-69; p. 68. Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27853941>.

⁶² For a general framework cfr. S.J. Gould, *Evolution and the Triumph of Homology*, cit.; M.J. Ryan, *The Evolution of Behavior, and Integrating It Towards a Complete and Correct Understanding of Behavioral Ecology*, in J.J. Bolhuis - S. Verhulst (eds.), *Tinbergen's Legacy: Function and Mechanism in Behavioral Biology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, pp. 127-146; for a specific application to human cultures cfr. J. Bulbulia - E. Slingerland, *Religious Studies as a Life Science*, in «Numen. International Review for the History of Religions» 59, 5 (2012), pp. 564-613. doi: 10.1163/15685276-12341240.

⁶³ S.J. Gould, *Evolution and the Triumph of Homology*, cit., p. 68.

worldwide species, might have experimented with societal organisations, with beliefs and with behaviours which diverged significantly from any surviving features in any contemporary society and which did not leave any significant trace⁶⁴.

And, yet, there is something tragically unfortunate about Norenzayan's belittling of historiography, because the breadth and depth of the psychologico-experimental analyses shown in *Big Gods* are nothing short of refreshing and exhilarating. Anyway, the scientific process of revision, falsification and confirmation will adjust and rectify the excess of experimental presentism in *Big Gods*. This process is already under way. For instance, a phylogenetic analysis of the religious beliefs in the Pacific Micronesia revealed that even though supernatural punishment preceded the elaboration of complex state organization, the belief in Big Gods followed the latter, disproving any unwarranted generalisation of Norenzayan's hypothesis and adding another important tile in the mosaic⁶⁵. Nicolas Baumard, Pascal Boyer and their colleagues are delving deeper into the alternative "economy comes first" framework⁶⁶, while Norenzayan himself is working with a team of researchers on a more historiographically accurate version of his "belief comes first" thesis⁶⁷.

Notwithstanding the apodictic tone which sometimes characterises *Big Gods*, Norenzayan explicitly stated in a subsequent reply that «What is needed is more integration. Those who are looking for one monolithic evolutionary account of religion will be disappointed. Most of what we can know lies ahead»⁶⁸. I can only hope for more historical accuracy in such big-historical frameworks, and more precise evolutionary tools supporting any underlying deep-historical explanation because, as Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe recently remarked, «[...] the hypothesis that religious prosociality provides a basis for large-group cooperation simply does not account for the diversity, heterogeneity and xenophobia of such

⁶⁴ Cfr. P.J. Richerson, Comment on P. Turchin, *Cooperation: This Time, Between Man and Woman*, in «Social Evolution Forum», October 21, 2014, <<https://evolution-institute.org/blog/cooperation-this-time-between-man-and-woman/#comment-3608>> (03/15). However, see also A. Currie, *Ethnographic Analogy, the Comparative Method, and Archaeological Special Pleading*, in «Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A», 55 (2016), pp. 84-94. doi: 10.1016/j.shpsa.2015.08.010.

⁶⁵ J. Watts *et al.*, *Broad Supernatural Punishment But Not Moralizing High Gods Precede the Evolution of Political Complexity in Austronesia*, in «Proceedings of the Royal Society B» 282, 1804 (2015), 20142556. doi: 10.1098/rspb.2014.2556.

⁶⁶ N. Baumard *et al.*, *Increased Affluence Explains the Emergence of Ascetic Wisdoms and Moralizing Religions*, in «Current Biology» 25, 1 (2015), pp. 10-15. doi: 10.1016/j.cub.2014.10.063.

⁶⁷ A. Norenzayan *et al.*, *The Cultural Evolution of Prosocial Religions*, in «Behavioral and Brain Sciences», 39: e1. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X14001356>.

⁶⁸ Id., *Big Questions about Big Gods: Response and Discussion*, in «Religion, Brain & Behavior» (2014), pp. 62-79: p. 74. doi: 10.1080/2153599X.2014.928359.

human groups, especially religious groups, that are documented throughout the history of *Homo sapiens*»⁶⁹.

For all this entangled situation, it should be clear by now that, any criticism notwithstanding, *Big Gods* has set the bar very high, and is here to stay. The grafting of experimental psychology into CSR and into religious studies has proved successful and is contributing to dismantling the old, die-hard misunderstanding which limited psychology to psychoanalysis *tout court* – especially in the non-Anglophone, classical history of religions. Even if titanic, historiographical work remains to be done, everyone interested in religious studies, deep history, and CSR should not ignore this amazingly bold volume.

ABSTRACT

The publication of Ara Norenzayan's Big Gods (2013) has marked a methodological point of no return in the current cognitive science of religion. Its editorial success sanctioned the experimental approach as probably the most effective way to scientifically update the various fields of the classical history of religions which pursued in vain the chimaera of the Ur-religion. Nonetheless, a close reading of Big Gods reveals that the psychological and experimental aspects have been inflated at the expense of the historical approach.

The aim of this contribution is to offer a detailed synthesis of Norenzayan's volume while underlying the major historiographical deficiencies which undermine the grandiose project at the heart of Big Gods' in fieri laboratory.

La pubblicazione di Grandi dei⁷⁰ (2014) ha segnato un punto di non ritorno metodologico nelle attuali scienze cognitive della religione. Il suo successo editoriale ha sancito l'approccio sperimentale come il metodo probabilmente più efficace per aggiornare scientificamente i vari campi della storia delle religioni classica che hanno vanamente inseguito la chimera della Ur-religion. Tuttavia, un'attenta analisi di Grandi dei rivela che gli aspetti psicologico e sperimentale sono stati sovradimensionati a scapito dell'approccio storico.

L'obiettivo del presente contributo è quello di offrire una sintesi dettagliata del volume di Norenzayan, sottolineando le maggiori lacune storiografiche che minano il grandioso progetto alla base del laboratorio in fieri di Grandi dei.

⁶⁹ L.H. Martin - D. Wiebe, *Pro- and Assortative-sociality in the Formation and Maintenance of Religious Groups*, cit., p. 3.

⁷⁰ A. Norenzayan, *Grandi dei. Come la religione ha trasformato la nostra vita di gruppo*, ed. by T. Pievani, transl. by A. Panini, Raffaello Cortina, Milan 2014.

KEYWORDS

Big Gods, Big History, Cognitive Science of Religion, Deep History

Big History, *Grandi Dei*, scienze cognitive della religione, Storia profonda