

(This week, cognitionandculture.net is hosting a [“book club” webinar](#) discussing Ara Norenzayan’s [latest book](#) with its author. This [précis](#) introduced the discussion.)

Norenzayan’s *Big Gods* presents an elegant account of how belief in super-knowing, powerful and morally concerned gods emerged as a result of normal individual cognitive processes and cultural selection. Any comprehensive account for the success of religion should be able to explain the wide distribution of atheism, which is currently the fourth most popular ‘religious’ outlook. Norenzayan proposes four roads to atheism: atheism caused by deficits in desire-belief reasoning, indifference towards religion, lack of exposure to public displays of religious acts, and analytic atheism.

Here, I will focus on analytic atheism and present Norenzayan with a challenge for his suggestion that analytic thinking counters religious belief. If analytic thinking decreases religious belief, how can we explain the persistence and cultural success of philosophical theology, which consists of analytic reasoning about God/the gods?

Briefly stated, analytic atheism is the state of mind when one actively reflects and deliberates, and comes to religious disbelief “Religious disbelief arises when there are opportunities to revise or override the cognitive biases that support religious intuitions” (from the [précis](#)). Norenzayan endorses the view—standard in cognitive science of religion—that intuitive thinking mechanisms, such as mental state attribution, push our brains towards religious beliefs. Analytic reasoning, by contrast, encourages believers to revise or override the cognitive biases that support religious intuitions. Norenzayan cites [several experiments \(conducted by himself and others\)](#) that demonstrate a causal link between analytic reasoning and decreased belief in God. Even just being primed with this style of thinking, as e.g., in a presentation of Rodin’s *Thinker* – has this result. On the basis of this, Norenzayan makes the following interesting prediction: “apologetics is doomed to failure as a philosophical enterprise because it fails to capture how our minds accept the plausibility of religious belief.” (p. 181).

However, I am not convinced that the evidence is compatible with this prediction. Many societies that worship Big Gods have developed sophisticated theological systems that include religious arguments, such as the European middle ages and early modern period, the Arabic Islamic world and classical Hindu theology see e.g., [here](#). Today, the interest in reflecting on religion is widespread, with a large output of philosophical theology in academic and more popular writings. How can we explain this anomaly? I propose four possible reasons:

1. The association between analytic thinking and atheism is the result of culturally contingent factors, rather than of a cognitive incompatibility between theism and reflective reasoning. While current westerners may see religion as opposed to reason, this is not how medieval theologians saw it (they spoke about “faith seeking understanding”). An author like Aquinas attempted to make his theology compatible with the best natural philosophy of his time. Today, as a result of fundamentalism in Christianity, Islam and other Big God religions that have sacred scripture, science and religion are often [pitted against each other](#). To examine whether the opposition between religious and reflective reasoning is peculiar to current western culture, more research needs to be done with people who are not WEIRD (i.e., not from western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic nations). Do people from non-western cultures also show decreased belief in God when they reason analytically, or when they are primed with analytic reasoning? It would be important to know this to establish whether analytic atheism is in fact a cause of atheism, rather than a culturally contingent byproduct.

2. Supposing there is a real cognitive tension between analytic reasoning and religious belief, why then do religious arguments occur so often? To explain this, we might have to look at the social context of religious argumentation. Very rarely do religious beliefs have an absolute monopoly.

According to Mercier and Sperber's social [account of reasoning](#), reasoning has a primarily social, argumentative function. If a religious belief system has to compete with other belief systems, it might be more viable if its adherents can present compelling reasons for why the beliefs are rational.

3. Apologetics, while using the tools of reason, paradoxically often encourages people to hold religious beliefs without further reasoning. For example, a flourishing branch of recent philosophy of religion is so-called Reformed epistemology. Reformed epistemologists argue that people are rational to believe that God exists, even if they have no evidence for their beliefs, just as they are rational to hold other "basic" beliefs, such as that the world exists. This may explain the recent popularity of Reformed epistemology in Anglosaxon theology. In effect, Reformed epistemology says it's OK to go with the intuitive, unreflective cognitive processes as belief in God is concerned (see [here](#)).

4. Apologetics uses reflective reasoning, but it does depend on intuitive reasoning to supply content for its premises. Think about the design argument, which infers the existence of an intelligent designer from the design of the natural order. Or consider the cosmological argument, which assumes that the universe must have had an eternal and personal cause. The premises that underlie such arguments (e.g., purposive design requires a designer, a temporal thing that exists requires an external cause) resonate with [intuitions that very young children already hold](#). As I will be arguing in a book forthcoming with MIT Press, *A natural history of natural theology*, religious arguments often appeal to our intuitive reasoning processes, as well as to the reflective ones.

These reflections on apologetics encourage us to rethink the relationship between atheism and reflective reasoning. How universal and cross-culturally robust is this relationship? What makes some intelligent, reflective people engage in philosophical theology, and what are the cognitive dynamics underlying this enterprise? Ultimately, I think that a better understanding of this will foster a better view on the cognitive factors that underlie atheism and theism.