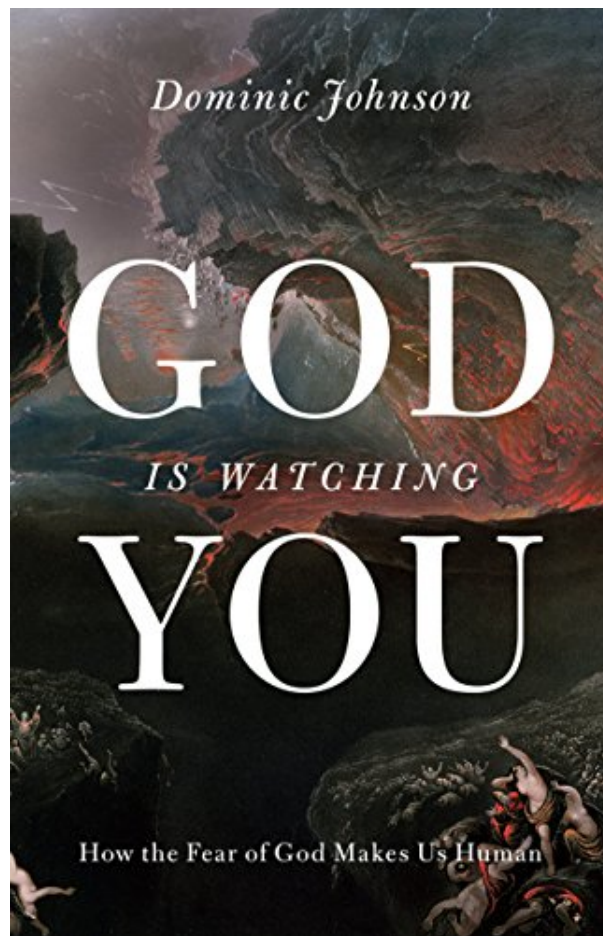
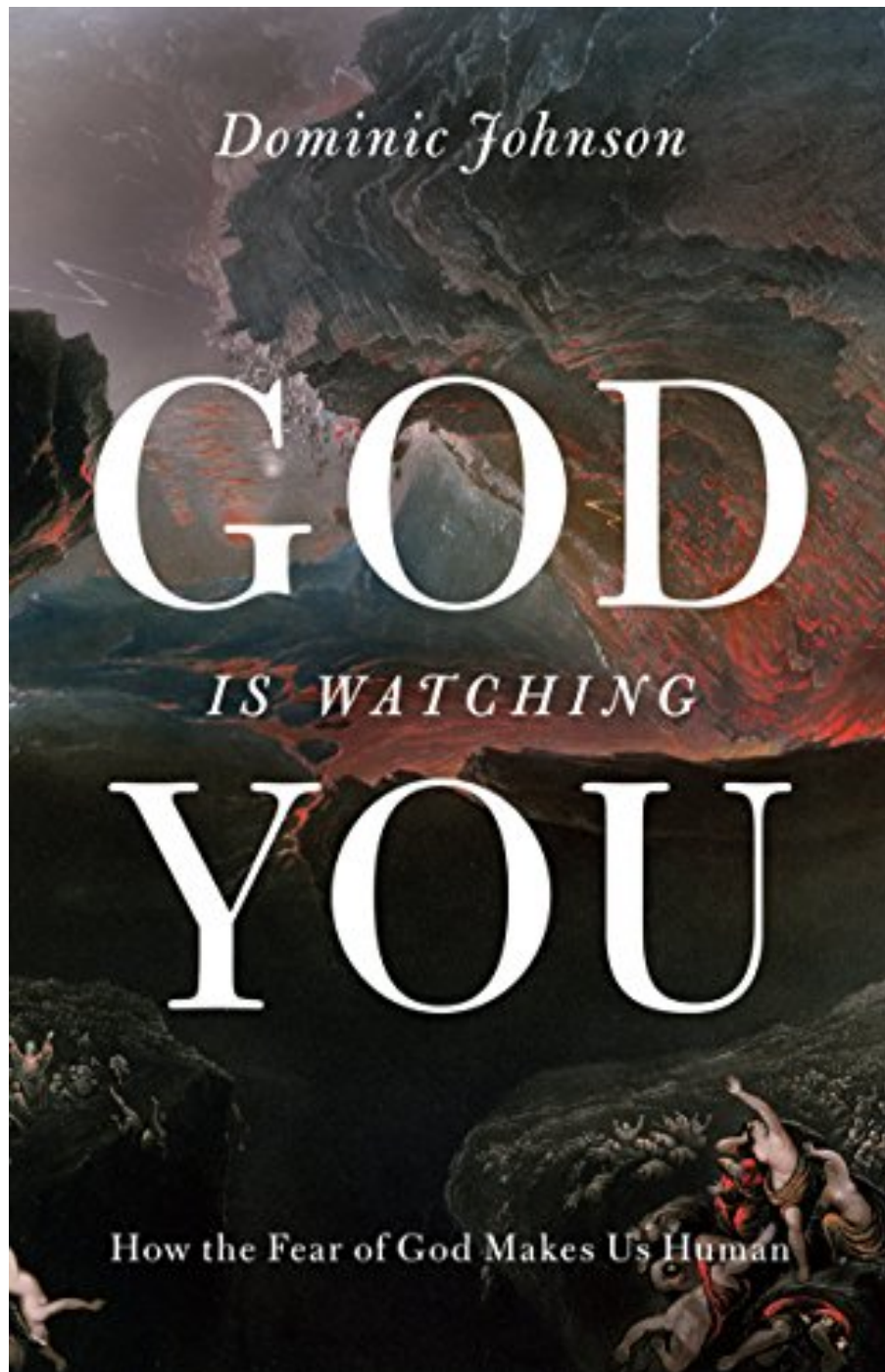


# **GOD IS WATCHING YOU: HOW THE FEAR OF GOD MAKES US HUMAN BY DOMINIC JOHNSON**



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"And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die." The biblical story of the flood crystalizes--in its terrifying, dramatic simplicity--the universally recognized concept of divine punishment. For millennia human civilizations have relied on such beliefs to create moral order. People who commit crimes or other bad deeds, we are told, will suffer retribution, while rewards--abstract or material--await those who do good. This simple but powerful idea has long served to deter self-interest and achieve remarkable levels of cooperation. Indeed, as all societies seem to have found, these beliefs are so good at promoting cooperation that they may have been favored by natural selection. Today, while secularism and unbelief are at an all-time high, the willingness to believe in some kind of payback or karma remains nearly universal. Even atheists often feel they are being monitored and judged. We find ourselves imagining what our parents, spouse, or boss would think of our thoughts and actions, even if they are miles away and will never find out. We talk of eyes burning into the backs of our heads, the walls listening, a sense that someone or something is out there, observing our every move, aware of our thoughts and intentions.

God Is Watching You is an exploration of this belief as it has developed over time and how it has shaped the course of human evolution. Dominic Johnson explores such questions as: Was a belief in supernatural consequences instrumental in the origins of human societies? How has it affected the way human society has changed, how we live today, and how we will live in the future? Does it expand or limit the potential for local, regional and global cooperation? How will the current decline in religious belief (at least in many western countries) affect our ability to live together? And what, if anything, will temper self-interest and promote cooperation if religion declines? In short, do we still need God?

Drawing on new research from anthropology, evolutionary biology, experimental psychology, and neuroscience, Johnson presents a new theory of supernatural punishment that offers fresh insight into the origins and evolution of not only religion, but also human cooperation and society. He shows that belief in supernatural reward and punishment is no quirk of western or Christian culture, but a ubiquitous part of human nature that spans geographical regions, cultures, and human history.

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8 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

An extremely interesting and thought- provoking work

By Shalom Freedman

What struck me when I read the first pages of this book is how it resonates with my own life-experience and belief. The idea that humanity does have a sense of supernatural punishment and reward, and that this is a central motivating factor in our lives simply confirms the way I think and live. My idea of this is based on a traditional Jewish idea but Johnson's claim is that this idea extends to all human cultures and is in fact an evolutionary adaptation which promotes human solidarity and well-being

I have never read any other work which looks at the Fear of God in such a complex and multi- cultural way

This is clearly an extremely important and thought-provoking work. It provides an explanation for the persistence of religious belief in an Age when Scientific Rationality according to some has dispelled any possible rationale for such belief.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A rather uncritical and one-sided celebration of religions and their role in history

By Matthias Berg

From an evolutionary point of view, there are basically three ways to interpret „religions“ or the widespread belief in supernatural agents:

(a) A religion is a kind of „cultural epidemic“, a 'mental flu' so to speak: useless and nasty (That's the message of the New Atheists, like Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris)

(b) Religions are by-products of basic cognitive functions; in itself they are useless, neither beneficial nor harmful (see Pascal Boyer or Scott Atran).

(c) Religions are evolutionary adaptations, they can be found in all cultures because they have been positively selected in human evolution.

Dominic Johnson is clearly in favor of option c): „Because god-fearing people were better able to avoid raising the ire of their fellow man, lowering the costs of real world sanctions, and raising the rewards of cooperation“ (page 8)

Most of the (not very numerous) scholars who think that religions are an adaptation have been arguing that the group is the relevant unit or level of (positive) selection (see Matt Rossano, Ara Norenzayan, and – above all – David Sloan Wilson.) In their view, religions serve as a kind of social glue holding together the members of society, fostering cooperation, and giving the more cohesive group an edge in the competition of group versus group. There is a lot of debate among scholars whether the forces of group-level selection are strong enough to generate complex adaptations like religions. Most opine that it is not.

The point of departure of Dominic Johnson is different, because he thinks that good old individual selection is good enough to explain the benefits of religions, not for groups, but for individuals. The most important environment is not nature, but fellow human beings. According to Johnson the most important feature of religion is 'supernatural punishment', the feeling of being watched by God or ancestors, even when other (living) people are not looking. The awareness of being monitored served, and still serves, as a powerful brake against selfish impulses of individuals; „Our self-interest may be better served by following social rules and acting well in the eyes of others“ (page 144). And if when the human others are not looking, the supernatural Big Brother is always looking!

The alternative to the fear of supernatural punishment is the Machiavellian stance: Trying to maximize personal gains while outsmarting my competitors; acting nicely when somebody is watching in order to gain a positive reputation, but acting selfishly when there is a reasonable chance to get away with it. Johnson's argument goes like this: „God-fearers can outcompete Machiavellians, as long as the total expected costs of selfishness (...) is greater than the cost of missed opportunities for selfish rewards“ (page 167).

The problem with this theory is that it is all but impossible to calculate those 'costs'. Johnson simply assumes that the costs of Machiavellian behaviour are greater than the costs of God-fearing. I do not think that this assumption holds true or is even plausible. Behavioral economists have shown in numerous studies that 'moderate Machiavellians' fare best: Act prosocially when others are watching, thereby improving your reputation; but act selfishly if there is little chance of being caught and punished by other people. (Besides: Isn't this more or less the basic strategy most of us apply in our daily lives?).

There is another flaw of Johnson's theory: Religions evolved when humans still lived in close-knit bands of foragers. People in this situation simply had (and still have) very little 'privacy' and therefore few opportunities for acting selfishly without being monitored by someone else. In this social environment there simply was no need for extra fear of supernatural punishment to evolve because social punishment meted out by fellow humans was a constant and real threat, with real consequences. That's the reason why anthropologist Chris Boehm in his marvellous book „Moral origins“ can dispense with supernatural agents in his explanation of the evolution of conscience by Social Selection.

What really piqued me about this book is that the author fails to take into account the dark side of religion. Religion is presented as a blessing for society, for any, even modern society. For example Ara Norenzayan in his book "Big Gods" presents a much more nuanced theory: In his opinion religion, especially "Big God" religions had an overall beneficial function during the formation of bigger, anonymous societies, in emergent states and cities after the Neolithic revolution. Religion was the ladder that permitted societies to grow and prosper, as long as there were no reliable secular institutions like police, courts of justice, parliaments etc... Now, in modern democratic societies, we have these institutions which allowed us to throw away this ladder, after having climbed it to the top.

And indeed: Today, the most democratic and peaceful societies (e.g. in Switzerland, in Scandinavian countries, or Japan) are also the least religious societies. Even if God-fearing helped suppress selfishness in former times, it obviously is no longer necessary for the maintenance of societal peace and stability. But Dominic Johnson argues as if this still was the case, calling religion a "vital cog" in the machine of society, insinuating that once we abandon the fear of God, havoc and unmitigated Machiavellism might again disrupt our societies. Sometimes the author sounds more like an apologist than a scientist.: "While religion may sometimes fan the flames of conflict or discourage freedom of thought, these costs may be insignificant compared to the (...) benefits of supernatural beliefs in the everyday lives of billions of believers" (page 238).

I disagree: Religion(s) today rather tend not to stabilize (heterogenous) societies, but to foment conflict and ingroup/outgroup clashes. Peaceful multiculturalism only functions inside a secular, democratic framework. At least on the societal level the fear of God is no longer useful; it causes more damage than good.

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

The topic is fascinating, but the book is flawed ...

By J.D.

The topic is fascinating, but the book is flawed. The author seems to have set ideas about religion, which he is trying to squeeze into an evolutionary perspective, often awkwardly. Little acknowledgment of the ferocious side of religion - the persecutions and wars fought in its name. Treatment of atheism is strange - conflates any superstitious belief with belief in god, and cites credulously a study saying that 1/3 of atheists say they will face god after death. He argues that evolutionary pressures changed as humans developed language, because we could use reputation in sanctioning, but his way of explaining it seems to confuse selfish behavior with the notion of the "selfish gene" (even though he quotes Dawkin's explaining the difference).

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