

G O D I S
W A T C H I N G
Y O U

HOW THE FEAR OF GOD MAKES US HUMAN

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CHAPTER I
WHY ME?

We reap what we sow.

—Proverb

On December 26, 2004, twenty-year-old Rizal Shahputra was working at a mosque in a town called Calang, near Banda Aceh, at the northern end of Sumatra. He did not yet know that 150 miles to the south of Calang, a massive 9.2 “megathrust” earthquake had cracked the seabed of the Indian Ocean, releasing gigantic landslides under the sea and sending a series of 100-foot tsunamis bearing down on the low-lying coasts of fourteen countries. Sumatra was the first landfall. Rizal and his coworkers felt a jolt, and soon afterward children ran into the mosque screaming a warning, but it was too late. Rizal was engulfed in the tidal wave of water and swept out to sea.

The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami was the second largest earthquake on record, and the longest ever—lasting around ten minutes. The whole planet vibrated by 1cm, and other earthquakes struck as far away as Alaska. In the ensuing hours, tens of thousands would die. And Banda Aceh, so close to the epicenter of the quake, was one of the worst hit. But Rizal Shahputra was alive. Clinging to floating branches, he found himself drifting helplessly on the ocean. At first, there were others around him as well, holding on to debris. But gradually they disappeared and he saw only bodies. Eventually he was alone. For days he drifted, with no sight of land. At one point a ship passed, but it did not see him and disappeared again over the horizon. Reciting verses from the Quran when he felt hungry, and surviving on rainwater and coconuts he found floating on the water, Rizal held on. On the ninth day, chief officer Huang Wen Feng aboard the container ship *MV Durban Bridge*, sailing out of Cape Town, saw a tiny speck on the expanse of

open water and decided to take a look through a pair of binoculars. To his surprise, he recalled, it was “a man waving frantically for help.” The ship stopped and Rizal Shahputra was rescued—100 miles out to sea.

When the waters receded, over 230,000 people were dead. Hundreds of thousands more were injured. Millions had lost family, friends, homes, and livelihoods—Rizal among them. Most victims were poverty stricken citizens of poor countries, where the devastation only added to ongoing social and economic hardship. With the shock of the sheer devastation and loss of life that grabbed the world’s attention for a few weeks, many people found themselves asking a simple question: Why? Why had hundreds of thousands of people suddenly lost their lives out of the blue? Why these particular people? Why those countries? Why now? And of all times, at Christmas? Of course, for Rizal Shahputra and the many millions of people around the Indian Ocean facing or following the tidal wave, the question was much more pertinent: “Why me?” Later, trying to explain his survival, Rizal said, “I believe the angels were with me . . . They saved me from the tsunami.”

Many of us have asked exactly the same sort of question. Living in a world of plentiful disappointment, hardship, misfortune, loss, disaster, disease, and death—as well as miraculous stories of survival against the odds—we constantly find ourselves challenged to search for meaning behind life’s trials and tribulations. The same questions surface after almost every devastating personal or natural disaster. Why did this house vanish and that one stand? Why did this person live and that one die? And what had they done to deserve it? We are somehow loath to believe that misfortune should strike the innocent. It makes no sense.

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

At first glance, the search for meaning in such events may seem like a quirk of western culture, perhaps the lingering influence of

Christianity in our cultural heritage. But growing evidence from anthropology and experimental psychology shows that finding meaning in natural events is, in fact, a universal and prominent feature across cultures. Humans the world over find themselves, consciously or subconsciously, believing that we live in a just world or a moral universe, where people are supposed to get what they deserve. And we appear to have been thinking this way for a long time. Our brains are wired such that we *cannot help* but search for meaning in the randomness of life. It is human nature.

But it's a double-edged sword. As well as believing that if we do bad things, *bad* things will happen to us, we also believe that if we do good things, *good* things will happen to us—that our good deeds will somehow be rewarded and our misdeeds somehow punished. It's as if we have a morality machine in our minds, enticing us to be good, deterring us from being bad, and keeping score. The expectation of reward and punishment is not an invention of human culture; it seems to be a fundamental element of human psychology. It dictates the way we see the world, the way we live our lives, and the way we advise others to lead theirs. Of course, when we do good or bad things we *are* rewarded and punished in tangible, material ways, by friends, colleagues, the police, or the dreaded taxman. But our brains take reward and punishment to another level. Above and beyond any material repercussions, we can't help but worry that our actions will come back to haunt us in more intangible and nonmaterial—supernatural—ways.

Such beliefs are most obvious within the major world religions, where the possibility of supernatural reward and punishment is not just a figment of people's imagination, but doctrine. Historically, for example, many Christians fully expected God to reward and punish good and bad behavior in this life, or afterward in heaven or hell. The threat is pretty explicit in the Bible—for example, in the story of the Flood, when God decided to annihilate all of humanity apart from Noah and his family and start from scratch, or Sodom and Gomorrah, which God burned to the ground with fire and brimstone for the sins of their inhabitants. Similar ideas are found in other religions too. Muslims and Jews do not believe in a Christian-style hell, but they

nevertheless anticipate positive consequences for good deeds and negative consequences for bad deeds.

For Hindus and Buddhists there is no all-powerful God, yet how one acts in this life will define how one is reincarnated in the next. Similar beliefs are found in small-scale societies as well and, as we shall see, are ubiquitous among modern, ancient, and indigenous religions alike. People the world over are anxious to earn favor with—and cautious not to offend—their God, gods, ancestors or spirits, or to avoid generating bad karma. There are, of course, numerous complications and exceptions among and within different religions, but they are variations on a deeper theme. The fundamental concept that anchors them together is that worldly deeds are expected to have supernatural consequences. Sooner or later, people expect payback. Consequences may be delayed or displaced, but this ambiguity is part of its effectiveness. Just because bad deeds don't seem to be punished straightaway doesn't mean they won't be later. We can never be sure we are off the hook.

HUMAN NATURE

While the idea of supernatural observation and punishment finds its most overt expression in religion, it can be found much more widely as well. The expectation of payback is something fundamental to human nature and the human brain, and that means it applies to us all—from devout religious believers, to agnostics, to avowed atheists. And even where we might least expect it. A friend of mine works in a big London investment bank. One day he went with his colleagues for a certain kind of ice cream—a Magnum bar—while waiting to hear the outcome of their first million-dollar deal. Ever since, when a deal was on the line, they were compelled to find exactly the same ice cream. When Magnum bars were hard to find, they experienced tangible panic and nervousness, a nagging fear that the deal will fall through. Something felt out of whack.

Sometimes such superstitious beliefs occur subconsciously and we are not even aware of them. But everyone, at one time or another, displays some kind of superstitious beliefs and behaviors as we go about life, much to the delight of anthropologists. Baseball players carry out careful rituals, such as tapping home plate with the bat a certain number of times or jumping over the baselines as they run on to the field. Soccer players point up to the sky when they score. President Franklin D. Roosevelt assiduously avoided having thirteen guests for dinner or travelling on the thirteenth of the month. Winston Churchill stroked black cats to get good luck. Harry S. Truman hung a horseshoe in the White House, and Admiral Lord Nelson nailed one to his mast. Jennifer Aniston must step right-footed onto a plane and tap the outside. Gun's N' Roses' singer Axl Rose would never play a concert in a town beginning with M (he thinks the letter is cursed). President Barack Obama carried a lucky poker chip during the 2008 presidential campaign. And so on. Such beliefs and rituals may seem bizarre, but they are important to people and hard to break. We may not readily notice or acknowledge them in our own lives, but they crop up all over the place in everyday activities, from wearing lucky charms to crossing our fingers to knocking on wood. There can be a powerful feeling that if one omits or changes the ritual, the universe will conspire against us.

Many of these secular superstitious beliefs seem to carry no moral content, and thus differ from religious beliefs, which generally do. But the point is that all such beliefs stem from a common underlying expectation: If I don't do what I think supernatural forces require—whatever those forces and requirements may be—I will face payback. Adding morality into the equation only seems to increase the likelihood and severity of punishment. Suddenly it has ethical valence, and the social obligation adds to its power. In countless everyday events from whispering a little prayer to putting on a lucky shirt to avoiding walking under ladders, we all find ourselves beholden to some greater force of nature that we would find hard to explain to a psychologist trying to account for our beliefs and behavior, or to an economist trying to account for our use of precious time, energy, and resources.

In disaster or crisis, the effect can become elevated to new heights. When the stakes are high, the meaning of events become all the more significant and our search for them more intense. We act as if our thoughts and actions will be judged, if not by God, then by some other cosmic, karmic, or supernatural force. And again it does not have to be religious. 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 often feel that we are being monitored. 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. In *Treasure Island*, when Jim Hawkins discovers the dead Captain Flint's secret treasure map, he suddenly begins to fear every sound and movement: "The fall of coals in the kitchen grate, the very ticking of the clock, filled us with alarms. The neighbourhood, to our ears, seemed haunted by approaching footsteps."¹ Strikingly, the feeling is intensified precisely when we do not want to be watched, such as when we are doing something selfish, self-indulgent, or wrong. At such times we cannot help feeling that even though we may be alone—or perhaps especially *because* we are alone—some kind of higher power is watching us and marking up our ledger.

We may even find supposed evidence for such supernatural activity stronger than evidence against it, particularly when such beliefs are powerfully bolstered by our cultural surroundings. Why would you *not* believe that God or ancestral spirits or karma were real if everyone else did, if your forebears had always done so before you, and if your parents, relatives, and friends had ingrained it into you since birth? Atheism is hard in a world of believers.

Indeed, most indigenous cultures do not debate the existence of God (or gods) the way we do. There is no question of whether supernatural agents exist or not. Instead, what we describe as religion is part and parcel of everyday thinking and living. There is little division between what is religious and what is nonreligious. There is no pressing search for evidence of supernatural agents as if they were a hypothesis to be tested, but rather a search for ways to live alongside them, just

as you have to live alongside the cycle of the seasons or your neighbors. Indeed, the whole logic of cause and effect can become reversed: rather than John Doe's bad deeds being thought to lead to misfortunes, misfortunes that befall John Doe are interpreted as *evidence* that he must have done something wrong. A belief in supernatural consequences may not always be present or strong in all individuals, but it is a remarkably widespread and pervasive aspect of life. Christian or Hindu, New Yorker or ancient Hawaiian, devotee or atheist, we tend to lead our lives *as if* we are being watched—whether by God, spirits, ancestors, or some other ordering principle of the universe.

THE GOALS OF THE BOOK

The goals of this book are threefold. First, to show that belief in supernatural reward and punishment is no quirk of western or Christian culture. It is a *ubiquitous phenomenon of human nature* that spans cultures across the globe and every historical period, from indigenous tribal societies, to ancient civilizations, to modern world religions—and includes atheists too. Heaven and hell may be the best-known versions of supernatural reward and punishment, but they are mirrored by a panoply of others that are thought to occur in this life—notably negative outcomes such as misfortune, disease, and death—as well as in the hereafter. And while we in the West tend to think of a single, omnipotent God as our judge, in other cultures rewards and punishments may come from a pantheon of gods, angels, demons, shamans, witches, ancestors, ghosts, jinns, spirits, animals, sorcerers, and voodoo. In other cases there is no specific agent at all, but supernatural consequences still come as the result of karmic forces of nature and the universe. The variation is remarkable, but there is a clear underlying pattern: our behavior is strongly influenced by the anticipated supernatural consequences of our actions. They make us question our selfish desires, deter self-interested actions, and perform remarkable acts of generosity and altruism—even when alone and even when temptation comes knocking at our door.

The second goal of the book is to argue that this is no accident. Rather, it is an *evolutionary adaptation*. The ability to anticipate rewards and punishments arising from our behavior would clearly have been favored by Darwinian natural selection, because it promoted survival and reproduction. And among humans, I argue, this extended to the anticipation of *supernatural* reward and punishment. Why? 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. This is not a just-so story about how humans as a whole are better off if everyone is nice to each other—nice guys fall right into the jaws of natural selection. Rather, when humans evolved the capacity for complex language and theory of mind (the ability to know what others' know), our behavior became increasingly transparent, and selfish behavior and social transgressions risked increasing costs—from retaliation or reputational damage. Avoiding these costs—an evolutionarily novel danger of life in cognitively sophisticated social groups—ushered in a new era in which the *suppression* of selfishness became a vital ingredient of an individual's evolutionary success. The looming threat of supernatural punishment deterred selfish behavior and increased cooperation, and this was a good thing for individuals as well as for society.

The third goal of the book is to think through the *implications* of all this. How has a concern for supernatural consequences affected the way human society has developed, how we live today, and how we will live in the future? If it is so important for human cooperation, might it even have increased the scope of what humanity could (and still can) achieve? Does it expand or limit the potential for local, regional, and global cooperation today? How will the current decline in religious belief (at least in many western countries) affect selfishness and society in the future? What does religion's spread in other regions, and the rise of fundamentalism, bode for the future? And what, if anything, is replacing our ancient concerns for supernatural punishment as the means to temper self-interest, deter free-riders, and promote cooperation? In short, do we still need God?

WHO CARES ABOUT THE WRATH OF GOD?

In today's world natural phenomena have well-known scientific explanations, so is there really any room left for beliefs about supernatural punishment? We could perhaps explain our payback mentality as mere ignorance. Once we understand science and statistics, there is no puzzle. Stuff happens. In fact, however, there are at least three reasons why we can't simply dismiss belief in supernatural punishment.

First, people continue to believe that events have supernatural meaning *irrespective of scientific knowledge*. Even with a PhD in plate tectonics from MIT, we might understand the physical causes of a devastating earthquake but be no less puzzled as to why it happened *on that day* rather than the day before, or why *those* people were to die rather than some others. Scientists may be better able to rationalize the underlying *mechanisms* of events, but they are not immune to the workings of their own brains, which also strive to understand the *meaning* of such events: the "Why Me?" question. Even atheists—consciously or subconsciously—continue to expect the machinations of payback, whether via some form of superstition, folklore, karma, just-world beliefs, fate, destiny, comeuppance, just desserts, luck, or misfortune. Knowing science doesn't free us from human nature. If anything, it makes the puzzle of meaning more acute—it is the last question standing.

Second, if we want to understand the deep, evolutionary origins of religious beliefs, then we must pay attention to the role of supernatural punishment *in our prescientific past*, not just its role today. Before scientific explanations emerged, things we now take for granted—the sun, moon, stars, eclipses, seasons, thunder, lightning, rain, fire, droughts, births, deaths, mental illness, disease—were more or less unfathomable. As is evident from indigenous (and many modern) societies around the world, supernatural agents are routinely assumed to be responsible for such natural phenomena. Indeed, they are called upon to maintain or alter them—for example in sun worship, rain dances, or shamanic healing. What we would call supernatural causation is just part of normal life. The situation was not much different

in the West before the Enlightenment. Until fairly recently in human history, supernatural forces were automatically thought to be the cause of much of what life threw at us. It was not a theory, it was how the world worked.

Third, *several billion people on Earth do believe in supernatural reward and punishment*. Among the world population of some 7 billion people, around 4 billion are Christians, Muslims, or Hindus, and another 2 billion or so subscribe to a variety of other religions. Only around 500 to 750 million are atheists (many of the remainder are people who do not identify with official religions but have personal religious beliefs that include expectations of supernatural rewards and punishments). If we want to comprehend the roots and regulators of social cooperation in these huge majorities, understanding beliefs in supernatural reward and punishment remains essential.²

A NEW SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION

An army of scientists, philosophers, and writers—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens among them—have set up their barricades and clamored for the expulsion of God from a world in which he no longer belongs. Not only should God be expelled, they say, because science has explained religious beliefs away as the neurological equivalent of junk DNA—an accidental byproduct of humans’ big brains—but also because God and his trappings inflict untold misery, stupidity, and war on a world that would be better off without Him.

A major problem with the assault by Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and other so-called New Atheists—and the often labeled “science *versus* religion” debate—is that it gives the impression that there is some kind of consensus among evolutionary scientists on the causes and consequences of religious beliefs. But this couldn’t be further from the truth. They bludgeon past a new and rapidly growing brand of scientific

research on religion that argues that religious beliefs and behaviors evolved precisely because they help us.

Although there are indeed many scientists who argue that religion is an accidental byproduct of human cognitive mechanisms that evolved for other reasons, there are many other scientists who argue that religion is the polar opposite of an evolutionary accident—rather, that it is an evolutionary *adaptation*. New work in anthropology, psychology, and evolutionary biology suggests that not only do religious beliefs and practices bring important advantages in today’s world (such as promoting cooperation and collective action), but that they were actually *favored by* Darwinian natural selection because they improved the survival and reproductive success of believers in our ancestral past. This offers a scientific alternative to the Dawkins model of God-as-accident. It also offers a striking twist on the old science and religion debate: religion is not an alternative to evolution, it is a *product of* evolution.

CONSEQUENCES

When we do something selfish or wrong, even if we are alone and could never be found out, we nevertheless find it hard to shake a sense that somehow our actions are observed and disapproved of by someone or something. It’s not logical. It’s not rational. But it turns out that such a belief is common to religious and nonreligious people alike. In fact, it seems to be ubiquitous across history and across cultures—part of human nature. We may reject the idea of this or that god, or any official religious affiliation, but even atheists are not immune to the all-too-human feeling that our good deeds will somehow be rewarded and our misdeeds somehow punished. Children see supernatural agency all over the place and find it perfectly normal, and even years of secular education can fail to eradicate these beliefs. Atheism is a battle not just against culture, but against human nature.

Amidst the dazzling diversity of religions across the world, a few key elements stand out as common to them all. This book focuses

on what I think is one of the most important, widespread, and powerful—*supernatural punishment*. The idea that one's good and bad deeds will be observed, judged, and rewarded or punished by God or some other supernatural agent is a recurring feature of virtually all of the world's religions, both past and present. That may seem surprising. But it should not be. If there were no *consequences* to following a given set of religious beliefs and practices, then why would anyone do so? Without supernatural consequences, good or bad, religion falls apart. Supernatural consequences are the fundamental framework around which other elements of religion are built. It forms the core of the machine, an engine for religion to work. And as we shall see in the next chapter, it is punishment, rather than reward, that wields the greater power over us.