“With a cheerful, good-natured smile, Daniele Bolelli torpedoes the often luxurious but spiritually leaky battleships that sail under the various flags of the world’s organized religions.”
—TOM ROBBINS, author of Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates, Jitterbug Perfume, Still Life with Woodpecker, and several other books

Create Your Own Religion is a call to arms—and an open invitation to question all the values, beliefs, and worldviews that humanity has so far held as sacred—in order to find the answers we need to the very practical problems facing us.

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Writer, philosopher, and professor of comparative religion, Daniele Bolelli, leads a romp through three thousand years of mythology, misogyny, misinformation, and the flat-out lies about “revealed truth” that continue to muddle our ability to live a peaceful life, free of guilt and shame and the ultimate fear of death.

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“This book is a declaration of war against all those traditions that want to limit our choices, stifle our growth, and restrict our freedom.”
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ISBN: 978-1-938875-02-1 U.S. $19.95
CONTENTS

1. A Call to Arms: Create Your Own Religion  1
2. A Call to Arms: The Sequel  17
3. The Intangibles: God  35
4. The Intangibles: Death and Afterlife (Maybe . . . ) 53
5. The Mother of All Choices: Inclusive or Exclusive Religions  79
7. Body and Senses  129
8. Sex, Sex, and More Sex  147
9. Killing Patriarchy and Rewriting Gender Roles  179
What you are holding in your hands is not another angry, organized religion-bashing atheist book; it is not a New Age self-help book revealing the deep secret that positive thinking is better than negative thinking; and it most certainly is not an academic dissertation on the world’s religious traditions.

It is true that a strange twist of fate has pushed me into an academic career teaching university courses on the history of religion as well as a few other subjects. It is also true that in these pages you will find references to individuals and practices from many religious traditions that may not exactly be common knowledge to those readers who have better things to do than pore through impossibly thick volumes on the topic. But make no mistake about it—this is not an academic work. Most scholars love spending their time devising new ways to dissect knowledge into tiny compartments and making it completely irrelevant to anyone’s life—dusty creatures who forgot that real life takes place outside of the library. The game is being played in front of their eyes, but rather than joining it, they prefer to
sit on the sidelines and observe. No, this book is about real life, and as such, it dwells outside the boundaries of academic knowledge.

Since I have spent quite a few lines telling you what this book is not, now may be a good time to begin telling you what this book is. What you are holding in your hands is a call to arms. It is an open invitation to tackle the key questions at the root of all religious traditions and, for that matter, of life itself. It is an invitation to question all the values, all the beliefs, all the worldviews that humanity has so far held as sacred in order to find the answers we need to the very practical problems facing us. The goal is nothing short of reexamining what it means to be human and bringing a better way of life into existence.

If this seems like a daunting, overly ambitious goal, you are probably right. Timidity was never my strong point. This is not a task for small-minded people. We are on a quest to shake off the dust from the theoretical building blocks on which modern civilization rests. Our worldviews are in desperate need of some housecleaning. We enter the twenty-first century still carrying on our backs the prejudices and ways of thinking of countless past generations. What worked for them may or may not still be of use, so it is our job to save the tools that are still relevant and let go of the dead weight.

I am inviting you to embark on an adventure with a double purpose. The first is purely personal. On an individual level, one of the healthiest things we can do is question everything we have ever been taught. This is not motivated by disrespect or some adolescent desire to be rebellious. It is simply what becoming an adult is all about. Once we are old enough to figure things out for ourselves, we can look back at the beliefs we were taught to live by and decide what works for us and what doesn’t. Any parent who is not a psychotic control freak would be proud to see his or her kids grow up
to think for themselves. Most people, however, go through existence in a state of perpetual psychological infancy. They hold on to certain beliefs because that’s what they were taught. They internalize some values as kids and never stop to think about whether those values are actually healthy or not. Like trained poodles, they will simply live their lives according to the rules that were passed on to them. They never become individuals, never psychologically grow up and choose their own values—they are mere machines replicating a program that was downloaded in their brains.

What this book proposes to do is to look at many religions’ answers to the key questions of human existence and, on the basis of this knowledge, come up with our own answers. In some cases, what resonates as true to you may be identical to an answer that already exists within a certain religious tradition; in other cases, it may come from mixing answers from different traditions; and in yet other cases, you may end up rejecting everything that has been proposed so far and create new answers that satisfy you better.

This book is not going to try to sell you on a particular ideology. Obviously, I will be answering these questions from my particular perspective, but the goal here is not to turn readers into Bolelli-clones going around spouting my ideas. I am not inviting you to trade a prepackaged ideology for a new one. I don’t want to make anyone my follower, and I certainly don’t want to be anyone’s follower. Life is too short to spend it living according to somebody else’s dogma. This is simply a blueprint to give you ideas and stimulate you to come up with your own worldview.

Moving beyond the individual level, the second purpose of this book is much more global in scale. Humanity today finds itself at the proverbial crossroad. On one side, we have the technological skills to dramatically improve life on the planet in very meaningful
ways. Never in human history have we had so much power at our fingertips. For the first time, people across the globe can communicate with each other at astonishing speed, and many are beginning to look at life from a global perspective rather than from the narrowly provincial one that has characterized human life so far. On the other side, the beginning of the twenty-first century finds us flirting dangerously with self-destruction. Whereas some technologies can help solve our global crisis, others have the power to annihilate us. Our beliefs, values, and ideas are what determine how our increasing power will be employed. If it was perhaps excusable for human beings to hold on to crude and potentially dangerous beliefs when our capacities did not exceed those of glorified baboons, we can no longer afford plain, old-fashioned stupidity—not when we have the ability to wipe each other out and take the natural world along with us. There hasn’t been a better time for a dramatic shift in human consciousness than now. Our very survival is at stake. What we need is a new way to face life that will increase our chances of tilting toward happiness and wonder rather than misery and species-suicide. As good old Albert Einstein put it, “We shall require a substantial new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive.” And this is exactly what this book is for. A better world needs to start somewhere, and there is no easier place to begin the work than in our hearts and minds.

I hold no naïve expectation that humanity is going to achieve collective enlightenment any time soon. There is a thin line between idealism and self-delusion. If our hopes rested on a global awakening, we would be in serious trouble. Betting on gloom and doom would be much more logical. However, if a strong enough minority of people changed positively in their thought and capacity for
action, and if most other people at least switched to less destructive beliefs, it would be more than enough to give cause for celebration.

Religion Is Here to Stay

So how does religion enter the picture? After all, wasn’t religion supposed to become obsolete in the modern world? Scholars, journalists, and various pundits have been proclaiming for over a century that the popularity of religion would steadily decline. In an age in which science, reason, and separation of church and state are becoming the bedrocks of modernity, many expected it would just be a matter of time before religions would fade away.

If there were a prize for the least successful prophecy in recorded history, this would be a top contender. Forget fading away. Flying in the face of what the experts predicted, religion remains as important today to billions of people around the world as it ever was. The only place religion has declined in popularity is Western Europe, where mostly secular outlooks dominate, and overcrowding is never an issue in church. Put your finger anywhere else on the map and you will run into a very different story. With the end of the Cold War, more wars are waged now because of religion than for any other ideological reason. Religious doctrines affect the laws and policies of most countries on earth, including those that are theoretically based on separation of church and state. The clash between religious conservatives and those arguing for more individual freedoms that for several decades has characterized the political discourse in the United States is becoming a global phenomenon.

The reasons why all the predictions about the demise of religion have failed miserably are fairly obvious. No matter how much scientific knowledge continues to grow, as long as human beings
don’t find answers to certain questions (Is there any meaning in life? Where do we come from? What happens after we die?), they will continue to turn to religion. Science is simply too dry to fill the void left by leaving those questions unanswered. For better or worse, religion is central to how most human beings perceive themselves and the world around them. Thus, it is plain stupid to assume that religion is irrelevant to finding a solution to the problems facing us: religion is both part of the problem and part of the solution.

**Religion or Philosophy?**

Before leading you on too far, let’s set the record straight about how I will use the word “religion” throughout this book. I don’t need psychic powers to foresee that quite a few readers will have problems with it. Many will be puzzled when they find out that what I argue does not require believing in the afterlife or in the existence of God and is not in any way based on faith.

How does what you advocate fit the definition of religion? they will ask. In an effort to avoid leaving you stranded in ambiguity, let’s deal with this issue right here, right now. Once, during the course of a lecture, an audience member asked renowned quantum physicist David Bohm, “Professor Bohm, this is all very interesting philosophy. But what does it have to do with physics?” Bohm replied, “I do not make that distinction.”

No clue where I am going with this? Let me try with another example. In 1492, when Christopher Columbus began shoplifting the American continent from its indigenous peoples, he wrote back home that “Indians could easily be made Christians because it seems to me that they have no religion of their own.” Following in Columbus’ footsteps, many European colonists thought that American
Indians practiced no religion because they never saw them going to church or performing actions that the colonists could identify as distinctly “religious.” In an odd way, you could say they were right. Among the hundreds of American Indian languages that existed, we would be hard-pressed to find a single word that could be translated as “religion.” If by “religion” we intend a special set of beliefs and practices that are separated from day-to-day activities, Columbus was dead on. Native peoples had no religion. But the truth was that religion pervaded every aspect of their lives. As a Dineh tribal member stated, “We don’t have a religion, but we do have a ‘way.’” The “way” referred to here is what exists before religion is formalized into a set of theological dogmas and rituals. It’s what writer Peter Matthiessen calls “religion before religion.” From this perspective, the entire spectrum of a healthy way of life is religion. The rest is a bunch of useless theology.

If we restrict our definition of religion to the belief in a god or gods, strict rules of behavior, and an emphasis on faith and the afterlife, then early Buddhism, much of Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto, along with many different Animistic traditions, would not fit the bill; rather, they would be considered philosophies. The traditions just mentioned are more than pure philosophical systems because they focus on nonrational experiences such as meditation and rituals. Yet they are not religions in the classic sense, either. Personally, I am not incredibly interested in debating the subtle differences between religion and philosophy. The ideas we will discuss in this book can appeal to people who believe in the existence of one or multiple gods as well as to people who don’t. Does this make this book more philosophical or religious? If I may steal Clark Gable’s famous line, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” We have too many important things on our plate to waste time arguing about
semantics. To the readers who feel that the dictionary police are on their side: I suggest you close the book, cross the word “religion” from the cover, and write “philosophy” or whatever else you prefer in its place. I have no quarrel with you calling it whatever you want to call it in order to feel better (although simply removing that giant, very stiff dictionary from your butt and relaxing a little may provide the relief needed). Ultimately, regardless of which name we attach to it, the quest here remains to search outside of existing dogma for ways to connect with ourselves and the universe, and walk through life in a healthy way.

Knock, Knock . . . The Inquisition Is at the Door (a.k.a. Everyone Already Creates Their Own Religion—Some People Just Don’t Lie About It)

Shaking the semantic Nazis off our trail was just a warm-up, however. Once we get to the essence of what this book is arguing, things may get considerably more heated. In many times and places, a call inviting people to create their own religion would be enough to send the villagers into a frenzy, convincing them to dust off their pitchforks and light their torches. The whole notion of creating one’s own religion goes against the claim made by many religions that they alone possess the Only Truth revealed to them by the deity of their choosing. In their eyes, religion is to be followed by human beings, but is never created by them. Countless people have been burned at the stake for simply urging others to challenge religious dogma and question beliefs. While this injunction is no longer followed literally, Jewish scriptures sanction the murder of anyone inviting us to change religious outlook. The Inquisition, which lasted over 600 years, fills the history of Christianity with plenty of mass killings
of people whose only crime was holding unconventional opinions in matters of religion. Still today, in some Muslim countries, any Muslim who decides to abandon Islam faces the death penalty for apostasy.

Why such venom and brutality? Because many of those claiming to be speaking for God have little patience for people who want to figure out for themselves what life is about. What is so terrible about it? Because you should not search for what is wise and good. You should listen to what we tell you is wise and good.

In light of these attitudes, it should become clear why a call to “create your own religion” is by its very nature quite radical. But it doesn't have to be that way. OK, since you are a most pleasant reader, I'll share a secret with you. Lean toward me so that I may whisper it in your ear. . . . Everyone already creates their own religion. Some people just don't lie about it.

Did I say something offensive or shocking? It’s a dirty job, but somebody’s got to do it. At the risk of raising the blood pressure of some modern wannabe inquisitors, let’s look at the ugly truth for what it is. Despite their professed devotion to a text or a teacher or a path, even members of established religions don't observe literally the dictates of their religion of choice. Many believers claim to be strict followers of their traditions, and some actually believe they are. But the reality is that they all are engaged to some degree in a selective reading of their sacred texts, adopting what suits them and rejecting the rest. It’s a simple process, really. Pick up the sacred books of your religion, look for passages supporting your values, and adapt them a little to your liking. Then highlight their importance in the overall balance of the religion, and conveniently forget all those other unsavory passages that either downright contradict your values or support behaviors and attitudes that don't fit with your
inclinations. Rather than having the guts to admit what they are doing and openly defend their right to pick and choose the passages they want to live their lives by, most people prefer hiding under the fable that their particular take on religion is the only correct one. All other people who put the accent on different messages and values contained in the same scriptures, they claim, are heretics who are twisting the essence of the religion. If this strikes you as intellectually dishonest, it’s because it is.

Hey Bolelli, are you really accusing billions of orthodox believers worldwide of being consummate liars? Not necessarily. Some don’t lie consciously. They just happen to be masters at self-delusion, so skilled at lying to themselves that they can do it without ever becoming aware of it. Why would they do this? you may ask. Because it would be too scary to take responsibility for choosing which values, among so many, to live by. It’s much more reassuring to go on pretending that one’s values are the only true eternal ones that enjoy God’s stamp of approval.

Other believers, on the other hand, don’t lie at all—not even subconsciously. What shields them from facing the contradictions that exist in every religious tradition, including their own, is plain old ignorance. As is the case with many faithful followers, their actual knowledge just doesn’t match their religious passion. Great numbers of Christians have never read the Bible cover to cover. Many Muslims only know the Koran through the passages their preachers decide to share with them. The same goes for the adherents of most religions. In the absence of direct knowledge, most people end up espousing some simplistic fairy tale version of what they believe their religion is about, never bothering to find out that reality is quite a bit more complicated. They are too lazy and unwilling to deal with complexity to want to dig a little deeper. It is easy to avoid
facing contradictions if you don’t know about them. And the dealers of second-hand religious fairy tales are very careful to feed their audience only coherent, simple stories that will not require them to ask questions and think for themselves. Still mad about the day when they were told that there is no Santa, masses of people swallow up these stories and gladly ask for more.

Even if ignorance were not so widespread, things would not be much simpler. If you care to lean toward me again, I’ll share with you one more secret: most sacred books revered by various religions are filled with internal contradictions. Since the contradictory character of most scriptures leads believers to pick and choose which passages to follow and which to ignore, it should come as no surprise that the very same sacred books have been used to support drastically opposite ideas. During the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln noted that, “Both [Southern and Northern soldiers] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other.” It was in this same time period, after all, that Christians used the Bible to argue for the abolition of slavery while just as many Christians found in the Bible the ideological ammunition to support slavery as a divinely ordained institution.

Other time periods tell the same tale. Early Christians were as divided then as modern Christians are today. For example, Saint Paul advocated celibacy and held a very negative view of any type of physical pleasure, whereas second century CE Christian teacher Carpocrates stirred his followers toward juicy sexual orgies. Martin Luther King Jr. was a Christian and so were the members of the Ku Klux Klan. Protestants and Catholics have slaughtered each other for a couple of hundred years all in the name of Jesus. Even today, you can find Christians who are gay and Christians who consider homosexuality to be the most horrid of sins; Christian feminists
and Christians who abhor feminism; anticapitalist Christians who view the accumulation of wealth as a sin, and Christians who believe wealth to be a sign of divine blessing; Christians who are very liberal, and Christians who are very conservative. Naturally, they all believe God supports their point of view.

This same story could be repeated about pretty much any other religion. Each denomination is usually firmly convinced that it is the only one that is faithful to the original message of its tradition and accuse all others of having strayed away. The simple fact that every religion always gives rise to multiple variations (Christianity, for example, has over 30,000 different denominations) is enough to tell us that Truth with a capital T is not exactly self-evident.

Trying to figure out who is right is a hopeless undertaking. We are too far removed from the origins of most religions to establish with any degree of certainty what the founders really meant. Most established religions, in fact, are based on shaky sources. Divine revelations seem to indulge in the very annoying habit of popping up in semiliterate corners of the world at a point in human history long before accurate, modern means of recording information were invented. What results, then, is an endless chain of revelations being told and retold over decades until somebody finally writes them down. Clearly, this is a process that leaves much room for error.

Did you ever play the game “Telephone” as a kid? Yeah, the game in which you whisper something in someone’s ear who then whispers it in somebody else’s ear, and so on down the line until the last person says out loud what he heard and everyone laughs because it usually has nothing to do with the original message. Imagine doing this for a few decades with a few thousand individuals before writing the results down. Then, let a few more decades/centuries go by before a council of “authorities” gets to vote on which versions
are accurate and which ones need to be destroyed. As weird as it may sound, this is exactly how the modern versions of most sacred texts were produced. No wonder these texts are littered with contradictions. And it is on the authority of these very dubious, very old documents that followers then fight among themselves regarding the essence of the original message.

Far from being an obstacle, this confusion is a gift that most members of organized religions actually cherish. The fact that their prophets are long dead and little information is known about them makes it easier for followers to project their own ideas, values, and expectations onto their favorite authority figure—something that many believe gives more legitimacy to an ideology. This allows people to create their own religion within a respected, established tradition while keeping the appearance of following the “official” version.

In the midst of these endless arguments, the founders’ original intention is clouded beyond recognition. Organized religions end up killing the insights of the prophets/gods they supposedly revere. Like demented kids hugging a puppy too tight and crushing him to death out of “love,” followers destroy their founders’ teachings with blind devotion. The freshness, beauty, and vital energy of the original message dies a miserable death when the message is turned into dogma. And what followers are left to worship is the dried-up, mummified corpse of what was maybe once a wonderful idea.

What this book invites you to do is to take responsibility for your ideas and, without slavish devotion to dogma, create your own religion. Rather than groping the past to find justification for your values in centuries-old texts, and using revered corpses as a source of authority, it is time to grow the heart and guts to follow your own insights and defend them on their own worth. Don’t believe something because Buddha said it, or Jesus said it, or Muhammad
said it. Don’t believe it because I say it. (OK, don’t listen to this last sentence. I just threw it in there to look democratic. Of course if I say it, you should blindly believe it.) Better yet, don’t believe anything at all that is not born out of your own experience. Belief is the habit of those too lazy or too scared to trust in themselves. Let’s try a more courageous path: find out for yourself. If we want to stop wiping each other out over religious dogma, this is the healthiest step we can take.

If rejecting dogma and nourishing the courage and creativity required to make our own choices is a good idea in all times and places, it is a talent that is becoming even more essential in today’s world. This, after all, is the age of globalization, choice, and syncretism. More people on earth have access to more information now than at any other point in human history. We know more about each other than ever before; ideas circle the globe at a speed our ancestors never even imagined. The most learned intellectual from just a couple of centuries ago had access to far less information than anyone alive today who happens to have Internet access. Being exposed to different stimuli and ideas coming to us from every corner of the world means we have more material to play with. It is only natural then that greater numbers of people are mixing the ingredients, making new connections, and revolutionizing traditions.

This explosion in creativity can be seen everywhere. For example, just about any song born today comes from the union of musical traditions that just a few decades ago had never been introduced to each other. “Fusion” seems to be the operative word at the root of everything, from the types of food we eat to the movies we watch—even the diverse ethnic makeup of many people alive here and now.

With every facet of human culture being touched by this rapid exchange of information, it only makes sense that religion would be...
affected as well. In the days before our globalized, interconnected
world, people practiced whatever religion happened to be the domi-
nant one in the country of their birth. Thankfully, the stupidity of
the belief that by random luck one is born in the one true religious
tradition, while the rest of the world needs to be shown the light,
is beginning to become progressively more evident. In the face of
increased knowledge and choices, traditional forms of authority are
collapsing. Rigid identities—be they national, ideological, or reli-
gious—are becoming more obsolete. Prepackaged answers satisfy
fewer and fewer people. Solutions and ideas that appeal to a particu-
lar place and time reveal themselves to be painfully narrow-minded
in a global world. Many of the answers people still turn to were
born in a world where one couldn’t see beyond the confines of one’s
village—where what existed in the next valley was foreign, exciting,
and mysterious. But this will no longer do. Nostalgically holding on
to the past is not going to help us face a reality that’s changing at
breakneck pace.

Damn, it’s an exciting time to be alive. We are just a few steps
away from self-destruction, but we are also a few steps away from
creating a better world that could exceed the imagination of the
most optimistic prophets from our past. We are dancing on a tight-
rope stretched on the abyss, the destiny of the world in our hands.
The weapons we take into battle are heart, vision, and creativity.
What we need are new solutions that reflect the greater degree of
knowledge and the radically different experiences that characterize
the modern world.

The availability of a much wider range of choices is transform-
ing the face of religion today. Many individuals belonging to sev-
eral mainstream religions have responded by dramatically reshaping
some of their core beliefs. Increasing numbers of people are opening
new paths outside of the confines of mainstream religions altogether. Most traditional religions, in fact, change only under duress; otherwise, they resist change and any challenge to their authority with tooth and nail.

The most conservative, fundamentalist branches see the global world as a threat. To them, more choices mean more opportunity to fall in error and stray from the One True Way. In their worldview, choice is the Devil’s tool to lead us away from the truth. Confronted with a world offering greater chances for choosing one’s own way, their answer is to dig deeper trenches and become even more radically rigid. The more freedoms human history offers us, the more fundamentalists will fight them. Despite their mutual hatred for one another, Jerry Falwell and the Taliban are twins separated at birth—modernity makes both of them recoil in horror.

I see the global world as the greatest opportunity humanity has ever had. In my view, it is healthy for traditions to be challenged. If traditional values lose popularity, it’s either because they are poorly communicated or because they are not relevant anymore. No healthy solution was ever born from whining about the good old days. As Nietzsche puts it, “[The sage] does not acknowledge custom or tradition, but only new questions from life and new answers.” While it is not necessarily true that newer is always better, it is certainly true that any theory, religion, or philosophy that was born in the midst of intellectual poverty can only be improved upon today. Whatever was good in it will endure, and whatever fails will do so because it belongs to a darker, more ignorant world.

What we will do here then is take aim at all the central questions debated by different religions in order to see what gifts of wisdom the past has to offer us, and how we can use that to come up with our own answers.