This is a follow-up. Please see my first post here: http://www.meetup.com/Tucson-Atheists/messages/boards/thread/49389008/#128651961

In 2004, before the book was published the author published a 19 page preview of it that is a good summary of his work and conclusions, downloadable as a free PDF here:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227505902_The_Sixteen_Strivings_for_God

The book is based on Reiss' previous quantitative empirical work that used a large survey to identify 16 main human needs or wants motivating all people. Reiss says that his work on motivation was subsequently validated by research of other psychologists.

If so the question about his Strivings For God book becomes: Did Reiss validly apply those needs in his analysis of religion? If he did, his conclusions are of interest to atheists and secularist. They identify non-religious reasons for the individual and mass appeal as well as the staying power of religion and underly the belief in gods.

While Reiss takes no such position I think that his findings could form a basis for empirically testable non-supernatural hypotheses about the origins of religions and belief in gods. On the practical side, the book provides a check list of needs and desires atheists and secular organizations must meet if they are to provide a home for that 20% or so 'nones' in the US population. Reiss said in the book "Secular society offers alternatives to fulfill all of the basic desires... Religion competes with secular society to meet those 16 needs and can gain or lose popularity based on how well people believe it does, compared to secular society."

Recently I tried to find out how the book has fared during the last 6 months in reviews available online. Sadly I found no professional level reviews by other research psychologists or scientists in related fields. No Steven Pinker or Daniel Dennet has taken on the book anywhere on line. But here is what has appeared since publication in late October 2015; sparse and not very encouraging.


Originally I cited this review not knowing that the writer, Jeff Grabmeister holds a senior publicity position at Ohio State University, where Steven Reiss worked before retiring. The review also appears verbatim at the OSU news web site in October 2015. It is a detailed and accurate description of the contents of the book and Reiss' conclusions, without further analysis.

At Physics.org, there have been 31 reader comments on the book review. None appear to be by psychologists or other scientists competent to comment and none seemed very interested in the book itself. One expresses skepticism about Reiss' conclusion that religion achieves mass acceptance by meeting many basic needs, contradicts Reiss' contention that this could be tested but doesn't give any counter argument. Another deliver an unsupported opinion denying that some of the needs Reiss has defined apply to religion. A third denies that religion and moral convictions can be dealt with by a questionnaire then goes off on an unrelated matter. The rest of the comments are pro or con some aspect of religion but are unrelated to the contents of the book or the review.
Written by a believer who is a collegiate minister, this is the latest (16 April 2016) review of the Reiss book. It is mainly an accurate description of its contents and conclusions rather than a deep critical analysis. The writer found Reiss' arguments that the appeal of religion is based on meeting the 16 basic desires and needs to be persuasive. But he wondered if that was a falsifiable hypothesis. In the book Reiss asserts that his arguments are scientifically testable but this comment makes a valid point.

Published in January, 2016, this is a largely laudatory on-line article by Andrew Aghapour who is not a psychologist. The blog is about critical and timely issues at the intersection of religion, politics and culture. The article is the most analytical of any of the on line reviews I found. It combines a brief review of the book with a more extended telephone interview of Reiss. In it Agapour asks the right questions about the book, Reiss' conclusions and his research supporting it, including methods and why spirituality is not on the list of 16 goals. Reiss answers that spirituality itself is composed of the 16 desires. In a response Reiss admits that he did not probe into any possible biological and cultural forces underlying the desires.

The only review of Reiss' book I found in the general press, it was written soon after the book appeared in 2015 by an online news reporter for the Express newspaper. The review summarizes the main content and conclusions of the book using many quotes from it but is without any critical analysis. Like Reiss, the reviewer does not claim that the book deals with the validity of beliefs in religion or of God. But all 187 comments on the review are arguments for and against religious beliefs, not about the content of the book which apparently did not interest this audience.

This is a pro religion review at a Christian web site that appears fundamentalists to me. It is one of the few reviews I found that attempt any critical analysis from either a religious or secular viewpoint. After a summary with quotes of some of Reiss' points and conclusions, it states: "The problem with Reiss' position is that it tends towards the argument that, because basic human desires are fulfilled in belief in God, then belief in God must be a construct of our imagination." That is not a conclusion Reiss himself reaches in the book; rather he states that he does not make such conclusions. But I agree with the reviewer that it does follow from Reiss' findings on the needs driving people to embrace religion and how the same basic needs are the attributes of God. Unsurprisingly, the reviewer then makes a standard apologetics response, that Reiss' conclusions actually support the existence of the Christian God, preempting Reiss.

This short October, 2015 review is one of the few that is analytical, using questions and excerpts from the book as answers. The comments on the blog review are better than the review. One of the critical comments by a psychologist of religion says that Reiss "is trying to explain religion by its effects (social benefits) rather than by its mechanism for cognitive tenacity and persistence" and offers an
alternative.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-reiss/religious-contradictions-_b_8808838.html
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-reiss/evolutions-other-message_b_9208922.html

These are blog entries by Steven Reiss in the Religion section of Huffpost, a main on-line news source. Huffpost has not carried a review of the book. In the first (Dec. 2015) Reiss summarizes his book and gives a sympathetic treatment to religion and belief in god, which he may share but he calls it spirituality. It interested me (and didn't interest readers) to see that there has not been a single comment on this blog posting.

In another blog post in January 2016, Reiss explains his own motivation and approach in writing the book, saying that "I am not interested in praising religion nor in criticizing it." He states his conclusions about people embracing religion to satisfy intrinsic human needs and that the described attributes of God are the same human basic needs in extreme form, giving the latter in detail. Reiss never states the implications of those two conclusions as hypotheses for the origin of religion and the belief that Gods exist, but they are clear. Again, there has not been one comment about this blog post or Reiss' book.

In a third Religion blog post published in February, 2016, Reiss gives what I think is a wrong-headed critique of evolutionary theory and evolutionary scientists regarding individuality of humans. Again this potential target for scientist and supporters of religion alike got precisely 0 comments, making me wonder if comments to these three blog posts are blocked.