

## REVIEWS

# BREAKING THE WRONG SPELL

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*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, by Daniel C. Dennett (New York: Viking, 2006, ISBN 0-670-03472-X) 448 pp. Cloth \$26.00.

Daniel Dennett, the renowned Tufts University philosopher, has long been an advocate of evolutionary theory and open intellectual inquiry. His new book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, is well-written, entertaining, thought-provoking, and often insightful. I suspect it will be enjoyed immensely by many readers of FREE INQUIRY.

In the first part of the book, Dennett lays out his two main goals. First, and maybe foremost, he seeks to motivate researchers to rigorously examine religion as a natural phenomenon, specifically through an evolutionary lens. Second, he hopes “to reach as wide an audience of believers as possible” (p. 23), to challenge them on their presumed acceptance of religion as the foundation of morality. With these audiences in mind, the book was written in an easy and flowing style, with extended appendices and footnotes for the more scholarly reader relegated to the back of the book. While both of Dennett’s goals are worthy, they are not easily housed under the same roof. The wandering back and forth between the two audiences he seeks to sway is a significant distraction. It is a shame that Dennett did not divide his material into two books: one aimed at scholars that presented his scenario of the evolution of religion, which would have fostered further research, and a second written for religious lay persons to shake them out of their stupor, as he would have it. This division of labor also could have avoided some of the issues I raise below.

The first spell Dennett wishes to break is the claim that religion should be protected from scientific study. The credibility of this claim, that religion is off limits, may strike some as curious, especially since Dennett himself reviews some of the extensive scientific literature on religion that already

exists. In my view, Dennett has created a straw man, not worthy of all the time he dedicates to the issue. The scientific literature on religion is enormous (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* have both been around for over forty years, although, remarkably, not one article from either journal is cited), and evolutionary studies of religion in particular are currently blossoming. Nonetheless, Dennett is correct that many congregations do not welcome scientists exploring their lives, especially if Darwinian logic is motivating their research.

Dennett also takes aim at academics who claim that “the only researchers qualified to do the research are those who enter into an exploration of religion with ‘proper respect’ for the sacred, with a deep commitment to halloving the traditions if not converting to them” (p. 312). But this is a caricature as well; nobody expects researchers to convert in order to conduct research. What study populations do expect is that researchers respect their right to believe what they want to believe. Sadly, that line was crossed in this book, and I am concerned about the consequences.

Many readers of this magazine will welcome Dennett’s boldness and applaud his firm attacks on those who profess belief or, as he puts it, those who profess to believe in believing. However, as an active researcher who has been examining the evolutionary foundations of religion over the past eight years, I was dismayed by his assault. One of the noteworthy advances in the field, and I believe the reason we have made any progress at all, is that recent evolutionary researchers have treated religion with some measure of respect. We’ve moved beyond the notion that religious belief is pure idiocy that some earlier writers espoused. While Dennett’s

intentions may be just, rather than advancing the cause of evolutionary studies of religion, his book could do more harm than good. Believers will find the tone of the book insulting, and many will undoubtedly exit early, as he acknowledges. Dennett's arguments are unnecessarily belittling, essentially telling believers that they are foolish for believing in God. Dennett suggests they might not believe in God at all but rather merely believe in believing. He might argue that most of us conducting evolutionary research on religion agree with his arguments, so it is dishonest to hide it. Maybe. But while he gets to remain in "philosophy land," as he calls it, the rest of us conducting empirical research have to interact with and collect data from real religious human beings; people who (if they've read Dennett's book) will now look on us with even greater distrust than they did before. Maybe we have been under a spell to pursue our research with respect for the populations we work with (this is less of an issue for most psychologists, as their experimental subjects typically have no idea why they are being studied), but I fear that breaking this spell, as Dennett has done, will only make our work far more difficult.

In the second part of the book, Dennett sees his role as an "ambassador," introducing others to the evolutionary literature on religion, and overall, he does an excellent job with his review. As he admits, he ignores significant elements of this literature, and in my mind unfairly dismisses the work of some researchers without a fair hearing (such as Harvey Whitehouse's cognitive theory of religious ritual); nonetheless, Dennett offers one of the most accessible surveys of the literature available. Most importantly, he articulates the meme theory of religion, which, up to this point, has largely been ignored or dismissed. While I admittedly still remain agnostic on the merit of memes (that is, cultural replicators), Dennett has done a valuable service in clearly articulating the theory and integrating it with mainstream cognitive research, so that the theory can be rigorously evaluated by others.

Some of the best material from the book may be the methodological issues Dennett raises. Dennett put consider-

able effort into defining the terms at play, such as God, belief, and religion, challenging the lax definitions used in standard scientific research on religion (those of us doing evolutionary work are equally guilty). He makes important contributions here and lays the groundwork for improved methods in future research. I hope this material is not lost amidst the more spirited and controversial elements of the book.

In the third part of the book, Dennett poses two questions: does religion make us healthier, and does it make us morally better? There is overwhelming evidence that, under many conditions, the answer to the first question is indeed "yes," but Dennett undersells this enormous body of research and impudently puts health researchers on the defensive: "prove it or drop it" (p. 274). He claims that the jury is still out, but really what the jury is deliberating about is *why* there is a positive relationship between religiosity and health under certain (not all) conditions—not whether such a relationship exists. Of course, the second question should be a slam dunk. We all know plenty of exceptionally moral people who are not religious (and we put ourselves first on those lists). Yet, the penultimate chapter, "Morality and Religion," which is devoted entirely to this question, is notably lacking. While Dennett demands evidence for everything, when he reaches what should be the pinnacle of the book (i.e., explaining that humans can indeed be moral without religion), he surprisingly provides scant empirical evidence. More troubling, the same "jury-is-still-out" attitude is not taken here. He discusses various religious atrocities, but those who actually believe that moral behavior requires religion will easily see through the bias; folks such as Pol Pot and Stalin are not even mentioned. Dennett delivers compelling verbal arguments, yet he will leave many readers puzzled and frustrated that he offers little data to definitively put to rest this absurd claim.

In the final chapter, Dennett responsibly cautions readers that we should not jump to any policy conclusions, since we do not yet have answers to the many excellent questions he raises in the previous chapters. Unfortunately, he does not follow his own advice and

offers various policy recommendations, suggesting that the book is motivated by his political agenda, rather than to advance science. (Yes, politics often advances science, but we are usually a bit more subtle about it.) I found it an unfortunate way to end an otherwise valuable book, as it was inconsistent with everything Dennett had been preaching for the first three hundred pages: let's ask the right questions so the research can be done. Then again, he has certainly given us all plenty of food for thought, and as he would have it, the future for evolutionary research does indeed look bright. **fi**

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