

Reviews

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon. By Daniel C. Dennett. New York: Viking Penguin, 2006. xvi + 448 pages. \$25.95.

Daniel Dennett proposes that we subject religion and its power to intensive scientific, multidisciplinary research, because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about it. It affects global conflicts and the very meaning many people find in their lives. Many religious people bristle at the sacrilege they think is implied by such an investigation or fear its results. This spell must be broken, claims Dennett. We must see if the emperor is wearing clothes, for his sake as well as ours.

I heartily agree, so far. Such a study assumes that religion is a natural phenomenon with no miracles. Indeed, only such an inquiry can demonstrate the existence of miracles (p. 26). (Of course, that argument is circular.)

Dennett, Austin B. Fletcher Professor of philosophy and codirector of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, is the author of *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown, 1991) and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon and Schuster, 1995). Although in his theoretical definition of religion he acknowledges that there may be family resemblances rather than a single essence of religion, his definition oversteps this caution. His definition is that religions are "social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought" (p. 9). By making supernatural agency a defining characteristic, he has focused his investigation on the more manageable types of religious phenomena, creating an easier target for the rhetoric of the attack on religion that forms the implicit subtext of the book. Dennett would do well to note the more rigorous definition of Loyl Rue, whose naturalistic examination of religion has the revealing title *Religion Is Not about God* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005). By his definition Dennett excuses himself from having to take seriously such non-agential conceptions of God as those of Paul Tillich or Gordon Kaufman.

Dennett is clear that the empirical examination of religions will be guided by and lead to evaluations concerning benign and pathological aspects of particular religions. He seems overly confident about the problems involved. He asserts that the way to handle such judgments critically will be through a public process of discussion and education guided by mutually shared values of rationality and justice that are themselves subject to discussion.

For Dennett evolutionary reasons are behind everything we value, from sugar, sex, and money to music, love, and religion. These reasons are free-floating rationales—blind, directionless processes that produce designs that can be evaluated in retrospect as if they were the product of intelligent designers. Dennett realizes that some social scientists and scholars of the humanities will object to the apparent biological reductionism here. However, he has a sophisticated theory of

cultural, not just genetic, evolution, that is, variation and differential replication of cultural patterns. (Appendix A presents Dennett's detailed concept of cultural replicators, or memes.) This approach asks not about biological fitness, to which religions may or not contribute, but about the cultural fitness of the meme. Religion in general or particular religious patterns may turn out to be parasites, reducing the biological fitness of their adherents. Further, he grants that there is a place in cultural evolution for deliberate cultural creativity. As a scholar of the humanities I am not worried that this type of search for evolutionary explanations will destroy religion. Such investigations do not destroy the enjoyment of music or love or food. Rather, I look forward to whatever insights such inquiry will provide, although I will be cautious about the claims made.

Rounding out Part 1, Dennett suggests that explanatory theories of religion can be divided into types, as religion is analogous to sugar, symbionts (mutualist, commensal, parasitic), bowers, money, or pearls.

Part 2 offers suggestions for theories of origins, folk and organized religions (with stewards and reformers), and the "invention" of team spirit. These are drawn from recent empirical studies of religion. To illustrate, I select the idea of a *hyperactive agent detection device*, whereby the useful ability to detect agents (predators, prey, mates, or rivals) is overdone and humans sense agents (gods and spirits) where there are none. This theory has some plausibility, but its usefulness is lessened by Dennett's restriction of religion to belief in supernatural agents (pp. 109, 116, 119, 151). Further pursuit of Dennett's program should outline the logical structure of these empirical studies. I do not mean merely the details of a study or merely how to choose between two or more theories in the same area. (Dennett does a convincing job, for instance, of evaluating rational-choice and herding-instinct models of group behavior.) Rather, we shall need to show the structure of the arguments that give credence to a biological-cultural evolutionary account of the varieties of religious behavior and of religion in general.

I propose that explanations of both religion in general and particular religious phenomena are often like legs of a sectional sofa some of which clearly do not fit, which can be attached until a Gestalt shift, sometimes gradual, comes as the various pieces, with attached legs, are "seen" to fit together. Like heliocentric astronomy and the evolution of species, the structure of these arguments, I suggest, will be neither hypothetical-deductive nor probabilistic but rather the accumulation of theoretically structured evidence until a general, tentative, evolving theory (such as Dennett's Part 2) is proposed and a paradigm shift occurs. The result will not have the persuasive power that Dennett thinks will convince those who have broken the spell and agree to look at the evidence objectively. If I am correct, there will be many bright people who follow Dennett beyond religion's spell yet do not become "brights" (his term for nonbelievers). The case for the rejection of even benign religious patterns will not be nearly as clear-cut as Dennett implies.

Dennett points out that the situation has changed so that many people have "faith in faith" or "belief in the importance of belief in something" (chap. 8). He is correct in examining this phenomenon and in pointing to a related issue: For many nonauthoritarian religionists God has become a nonpersonal "essence," although few use that term. Here is a serious weakness of the application of Dennett's theory. He gives little attention to nonauthoritarian religion, resulting in a fallacy of overgeneralization from an easy target. Chicago theologians George Burman

Foster, Shaile Mathews, Eustace Haydon, and Henry Nelson Wieman showed the compatibility of a naturalistic approach with religion, even theism for Mathews and Wieman. Dennett suggests that modified theism, or nontheistic religion, has no staying power, overlooking the time since Spinoza, long enough for a meme to earn respect. Although he disarmingly nuances his ideas when he is setting forth empirical hypotheses, his black-and-white thinking is evident in dealing with nonauthoritarian religion and revised theism. Apparently scientists, not religionists, are allowed to redefine terms, as if religious memes should not evolve. Instead of being an illegitimate protective device, the withdrawal of religion from falsifiability may be an indication of cultural evolution.

In Part 3 Dennett turns from explanation to evaluation and prescription. He addresses the barriers of emotion, academic territoriality, and loyalty to God and suggests that current evidence is that religion is a mixed bag; its health benefits, for example, may have negative side effects compared to other delivery systems. Chapter 10 shows that to claim religion is necessary for the content or motivation of morality is problematic. Chapter 11 proposes a national curriculum for religious education, though he does not discuss the difficulty of preparing or teaching it.

In his eagerness to destroy religion's power, Dennett has made many careless moves. His attack on pathological religion would be more effective if he were more careful.

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Panentheism—The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present.

By John W. Cooper. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006. 368 pages. \$36.99.

Panentheism is a foundational concept for much of modern theology. Within the religion-and-science community it is of even more importance because many involved in the discussion accept it as foundational. John Cooper, beginning with a quote from *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3d ed.), presents this definition of panentheism: “‘The Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part exists in Him, but His Being is more than, and not exhausted by, the universe.’ In other words, God and the world are ontologically distinct and God transcends the world, but the world is in God ontologically” (p. 27). He also states that “there are widely differing ways of understanding panentheism” (p. 27).

Cooper has two aims: “to present a historical overview of panentheism” and to present “a critical and apologetic response to panentheism” (p. 20). The majority of the book is dedicated to the former, with the last chapter addressing the latter. He explicitly attempts to keep these two aims separate (p. 21). As a professor of philosophical theology at Calvin Theological Seminary and a minister of the Christian Reformed Church, he approaches the study from a position of Christian orthodoxy in the Reformed tradition, which he states straightforwardly (p. 21).

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. The first chapter is an introduction, followed by twelve chapters that cover the history of panentheistic thought.