

Dennett's dangerous idea

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon, by Daniel Dennett, Viking Adult, 2006, 464 pages, \$26

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American philosopher Daniel Dennett's latest book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, was attacked from the right last February in the pages of the *New York Times Book Review* by Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*.

This attack prompted a reply that was posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*. The reply promised that a review of the book itself would soon appear on the site. The review follows here.

The central thrust of Dennett's book is that the methods of science should be used to scrutinize religion. Dennett argues that religion is of such immense social and political significance that it behooves mankind to turn the attention of the "best minds on the planet" to its study. All taboos should be set aside.

As Dennett says, "Up to now, there has been a largely unexamined mutual agreement that scientists and other researchers will leave religion alone, or restrict themselves to a few sidelong glances, since people get so upset at the mere thought of a more intensive inquiry. I propose to disrupt this presumption, and examine it."

This "unexamined mutual agreement" is the first spell that must be broken. The second, Dennett writes, is the spell of religion itself.

For Dennett, religion, though it requires belief in the supernatural, is itself a natural process, "a human phenomenon composed of events, organisms, objects, structures, patterns and the like that obey all the laws of physics and biology, and hence do not involve miracles." To frame the issue this way, Dennett points out, makes no claim about the existence of a supernatural being, only that the processes of religious observance are natural ones and therefore subject to rational inquiry and scrutiny.

This claim is what provoked the ire of Wieseltier and others who want to preserve the hallowed status of religion and shield it from examination.

To consider religion as a natural process is not to make a moral judgment about it. "Religion, like love and music, is natural. But so is smoking, war and death.... The Aswan Dam is no less natural than a beaver's dam, and the beauty of a skyscraper is no less natural than the beauty of a sunset." Since man is a part of nature, so too, ultimately, are the products of his culture.

The main questions that Dennett argues should be considered are as follows: "What is this phenomenon or set of phenomena that means so much to so many people, and why—and how—does it command allegiance and shape so many lives so strongly?"

Dennett provides a working definition of religions as "social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought." To this he counterposes the definition of religion proposed by American philosopher William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*: "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine."

While James, writing a century ago, chose to concentrate on the

personal-psychological character of religious faith, Dennett finds it more important to examine its social character. (That this social character is treated by Dennett in a rather ahistorical manner is a point that will be considered below.)

The naturalistic approach of the book finds expression in Dennett's comparison of religion to evolutionary processes in the natural world. Dennett understands that religion is not a physical characteristic subject to Darwinian selection (like size, swiftness, etc), but he argues that there are important analogies that merit consideration. Any evolved feature of an organism has both a cost and, potentially, a benefit. Analogously, religious practice is, for the individual homo sapiens as well as the group, an outlay of energy. It requires time and effort, both of which could be spent on other pursuits that might be more beneficial to human beings. So, asks Dennett, *cui bono* (who benefits)?

He does not exclude the possibility that, either in its original development or modern variants, religion does not benefit the religious. It might propagate at the expense of the "host," to use another biological analogy, much like a parasitic species. A better analogy might be to a social process that causes harm to those who engage in it, like smoking, which spreads largely because those who begin tend to become physically addicted. Religion, says Dennett, might be shown to be beneficial to those engaged in its practice, but this is not a necessary prerequisite for it to spread.

Dennett offers his own hypothesis of the origins and development of religion. He does not pretend that it will mark the final word on the subject and encourages revisions and improvements to the theory that he offers. The essential points of his idea are as follows.

A naturalistic account of the development of religion must reveal what Dennett terms the "free-floating rationales" that fostered its spread. "Free-floating rationales" are evolutionary processes that "'discover' designs that work."

"They work because they have various features, and these features can be described and evaluated in retrospect *as if* they were the intended brainchildren of intelligent designers who had worked out the rationale for the design in advance." One example: animals evolved an ability to taste sweet things because these had higher energy content (from sugars). Animals more attuned to sweetness had a reproductive advantage (more energy) and became more represented in the population over many generations.

Concurrently, plants whose seeds were embedded in sweet fruits that were eaten benefited from the animals' "sweet tooth." The sweeter the fruit, roughly speaking, the more likely it was to be eaten and the plant seeds to spread. Successive generations of plants developed sweeter fruits.

The "free-floating rationale" here is that the process "made perfectly good sense, economically; it was a *rational* transaction, conducted at a slower-than-glacial pace over the eons, and of course no plant or animal

had to understand any of this in order for the system to flourish.”

Is there an appropriate analogy to be made with human practices? Dennett takes boat-building as an example. Boats tend to be long and symmetrical. There are good technical reasons to build boats in this way, but humans built boats in this general shape before they discovered the relevant engineering principles.

The basic design could have developed evolutionarily rather than by conscious forethought. Those who built better boats were more successful and boats of the type they built were more represented among all boats as time passed. “Here we have the design of a human artifact—culturally, not genetically transmitted—without a human designer, without an author or inventor or even a knowing editor or critic.”

For Dennett, ideas are memes, a term used by biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 *The Selfish Gene* and meaning generally “units of cultural replication.” The value of this term is much debated because the analogy of cultural developments to evolutionary processes in biology has intrinsic limits and it is not always clear that there is much to be learned in taking the approach.

Dennett turns to such issues in an appendix, one section of which asks: “Is cultural evolution Darwinian?” He offers a rather qualified answer. “We should remind ourselves,” he says, “that, just as population genetics is no substitute for ecology, which investigates the complex interactions between phenotypes and environments that ultimately yield the fitness differences presupposed by genetics, no one should anticipate that a new science of memetics would overturn or replace all the existing models and explanations of cultural phenomena developed by the social sciences.” The question remains: what precisely is the value of the “meme” idea in the study of religion?

“Memetics” provides Dennett with a theoretical framework that he argues will provide explanatory power in treating religion. But it does not replace, he states in the book, the empirical study of the different religions and their particular histories.

Rather, these empirical inquiries provide the necessary raw materials with which to develop and test a theory of the development of religion, much as the observations of naturalists provided the material that proved to be of critical importance to Darwin as he developed his theory of natural selection.

Another benefit of approaching the subject from the standpoint of “memes,” says Dennett, is that it allows investigators to look at the features of a particular religion without “prejudging the issue of whether we’re talking about genetic or cultural evolution” and whether it was designed by a person (or group), or rather developed unconsciously as a “free-floating rationale.” Such an approach, according to Dennett, would allow investigators to steer clear of simplistic explanations of religion as merely a biological phenomenon (as though humans possessed a “god gene”) or as merely a human-designed phenomenon.

This does not yet answer the question of how religions originally arose. Dennett posits the following explanation. First, evolution supplied a reason for more advanced animals to “adopt the intentional stance,” that is, to believe that other creatures they encountered acted as “agents with // limited *beliefs* about the world, // specific *desires*, // and enough common sense to do the *rational* thing given those beliefs and desires.”

The intentional stance developed because it benefited the animals that adopted it by providing advantages during encounters with others who were potential competitors, predators, etc. Once established, however, the tendency to adopt the intentional stance can become hyperactivated. Animals presume the presence of agents where none may really exist. A dog, for example, may bark when he hears a branch fall in the nearby woods because he presumes it to be an intruder. What is, in general, helpful can be overdone.

Evolution also fostered the practice of informing (rather than misinforming) one’s offspring. It proved to be rational, in general, for an

animal to trust its parents. To the offspring, parents are repositories of useful information; they have (or seem to have) the answers that the animal needs. This is no less true for humans than other animals.

These two phenomena can be considered together. “A survey of the world’s religions shows that almost always the full-access agents [imagined agents that humans presume have the answers to their questions] turn out to be ancestors, gone but not at all forgotten.” Why the need for these “full-access agents”? To help make decisions, to help choose between competing alternatives that seem equally attractive (or unattractive). The hypothesized benefits of turning for information to “full access agents” like dead ancestors could be many. Two examples: the advantages conferred to the creature that can make a decision rather than remain stymied and the solace of divination (and the solace’s benefits).

We have arrived at what Dennett calls “folk religion,” “the sorts of religion that have no written creeds, no theologians, no hierarchy of officials. These provided the environment out of which organized religions could develop.” Folk religions tend to evolve features that benefit their transmission: group chants (where the collective exercises a form of error-correcting) and even the incorporation of incomprehensible elements (which must be memorized rather than explained, explanation being prone to modification in the retelling).

The transformation from folk to organized religion most likely occurred with the domestication of agriculture and the formation of small societies (as opposed to bands of hunter-gatherers). This provided the fertile ground for the transformation of religions.

Dennett explains: “Memes that foster human group solidarity are particularly fit (as memes) in circumstances in which host survival (and hence host group fitness) most directly depends on hosts’ joining forces in groups. The success of such meme-infested groups is itself a potent broadcasting device, including outgroup curiosity (and envy) and thus permitting linguistic, ethnic, and geographic boundaries to be more readily penetrated.”

At approximately the same time, the social division of labor allowed the development of a group of caretakers of religion (“meme stewards” in Dennett’s words). They tended to steer religions toward adopting resilient tenets, including an ever-greater number that were impossible to disprove. This formed the starting point for the development of orthodoxy.

The strengths of Dennett’s book lie in its materialism and the fact that it makes reference to a wide body of contemporary research on these subjects. It also suggests a new and potentially fruitful philosophical approach to the study of religion. It suggests several lines of inquiry that should be pursued in the future.

Also notable are the sections that protest the supposed positive correlation between religious belief and morality. “The misalignment of goodness with the denial of scientific materialism has a long history, but it is a misalignment,” says Dennett. “There is *no reason at all* why a disbelief in the immateriality or immortality of the soul should make a person less caring, less moral, less committed to the well-being of everybody on Earth than someone who believes in ‘the spirit.’ ”

He adds that there “are plenty of ‘deeply spiritual’ people—and everybody knows this—[who] are cruel, arrogant, self-centered, and utterly unconcerned about the moral problems of the world.”

Breaking the Spell does have, however, significant limitations. While the centrality of neo-Darwinism to his outlook contributes to an historical approach to the development of religion, Dennett does not add to this a theoretical framework for considering the development of human society. Dennett treats human history in a very abstract, non-concrete form. While some form of abstraction is necessary in any theory of social development, much can be lost in the process. This is the case in *Breaking the Spell*, where man is treated in an almost exclusively natural sense.

For this reason, although Dennett’s proposed account of the primitive origins of religion contains many interesting insights, his elaboration of

the transformation of “folk religion” to “organized religion” is weaker.

“The major religions of today are as different from their ancestral versions as today’s music is different from the music of ancient Greece and Rome,” says Dennett. “The changes that have been established are far from random. They have tracked the restless curiosity and changing needs of our encultured species.” There is an element of truth here, but Dennett’s explanation of the development of religion from early to modern society does not go much beyond this statement.

Dennett ignores the fact that religion has found fertile ground for development, not simply as a body of abstract, ideal “replicators,” driven by their own separate logic. The changes in the prevalent forms of religion cannot properly be accounted for as adaptations to human beings’ “relentless curiosity.”

Rather, religious conceptions had to have found a “substrate” (to borrow a term from the natural sciences) in real, historically concrete societies—i.e., in the deeply polarized social fabric that has characterized every stage of man’s historical development following the most primitive societies.

The rooting of ideology, including religion, in economic relations is a central conception of Marxism, a point with which Dennett must be familiar. Unfortunately, however, it comes as little surprise to see that Dennett is openly dismissive of Marxism. Still worse, his dismissiveness generally takes the form of disregarding the Marxist tradition.

It is not that Dennett has adopted a position opposed to Marxism and argued openly against it. Instead, he imagines that the Marxist critique of religion can simply be ignored. There is nothing in *Breaking the Spell*, for example, that suggests that Dennett has read the criticism of religion written from a genuinely Marxist standpoint, such as Karl Kautsky’s *Foundations of Christianity* or the writings of Marx and Engels on the subject.

Dennett’s decision to ignore the Marxist critique of religion is the most severe handicap in the direction that he has adopted in *Breaking the Spell* and amounts to a type of intellectual dereliction of duty. Dennett defines himself as a philosopher, not simply a popularizer of science or advocate of atheism. Considering this point, it is not justifiable for him to look past what Marxism has to say on the subject of religion.

To be sure, the popular misidentification of Stalinism and Marxism is partially responsible for the fact that Western academics tend to ignore Marxism with little protest. But this decision also has to do with the virtual illegalization of Marxism, particularly among US academics, a process that has landed so much of scholarship in the humanities in a deep impasse. Consider, if only briefly, what is being left out.

Marxism insists that religion is a form of ideology and, as such, must ultimately be explained on the basis of the material economic relations of men living in society. Explaining the point in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels wrote: “Still higher ideologies, that is, such as are still further removed from the material, economic basis, take the form of philosophy and religion. Here the interconnection between conceptions and their material conditions of existence becomes more and more complicated, more and more obscured by intermediate links. But the interconnection exists.”

Religion, according to Engels, stands so far from the economic relations of society that it seems to be alien to it, but it is actually dependent upon it. “Religion arose in very primitive times from erroneous, primitive conceptions of men about their own nature and external nature surrounding them. Every ideology, however, once it has arisen, develops in connection with the given concept-material, and develops this material further; otherwise, it would not be an ideology, that is, occupation with thoughts as with independent entities, developing independently and subject only to their own laws. In the last analysis, the material life conditions of the persons inside whose heads this thought process goes on determine the course of the process, which of necessity remains unknown

to these persons, for otherwise there would be an end to all ideology.”

The Marxist counter-argument to Dennett is not some sort of crude and simplistic materialism that considers important only the class structure of society and techniques of production. It does not deny that ideas and fields of inquiry have their own histories. But Marxism does recognize that material factors are ultimately to be found at the root of all ideology, of which religion is a part.

The history of ideas and the development of man’s productive forces are completely intertwined, but the latter must serve as the basis for understanding the former. Any convincing explanation of religion must come to terms with the manner in which it has served to protect the interests of the ruling classes of society.

To reply to a charge often leveled at Marxists, and called to mind at one point in *Breaking the Spell*, this does not mean that religion is simply a conspiracy of priests and rulers to hoodwink the majority. But the significance of the central tenets of religion cannot fully be comprehended without an understanding of the class interests of the major social layers in the society in question.

The false solace that religion offers has played and still plays today a critical part in retarding the growth of class consciousness among the working class and other oppressed layers of society. Official morality, sanctioned by religion, inevitably justifies the essential characteristics of the existing social order and exerts a paralyzing and generally mind-numbing grip on the exploited classes of society. Those whose attention ought to be focused on the improvement of their conditions of life on earth—not on dreams of an afterlife—are trapped by religion. This is the meaning of Marx’s aphorisms that religion is the “opium of the masses” and the “sigh of the oppressed.”

More generally, as Engels explained, underlying the religious conflicts throughout history—from the development of monotheisms to the expansion of Christianity after the collapse of the Roman Empire, to the explosion of the Protestant rebellion against Catholicism and even the rationalist attack upon religion during the Enlightenment—have been conflicts among the major classes of society. During this entire period, the ideological expression of the class struggle, particularly between different layers of the feudal and early bourgeois elites, could take only a religious form.

The most common alternative notion among those who study religion is an idealized conception. What Engels wrote of Feuerbach could be justly applied to Dennett: “In the form he is realistic since he takes his start from man; but there is absolutely no mention of the world in which this man lives; hence, this man remains always the same abstract man who occupied the field in the philosophy of religion.”

To put it somewhat differently, because Dennett never really examines the social history of man, his hypotheses about the development of religion after agricultural societies arose have a contrived feel to them. Man as Dennett imagines him, naturalistically, substitutes for historical man. An imagined history is substituted for the real one.

The danger of adopting an excessively speculative, somewhat imagined starting point for inquiry is demonstrated rather clearly in another way in *Breaking the Spell*. Dennett’s relative disinterest in the actual social dimensions of human society renders him vulnerable to complete misunderstandings of the present political situation.

Alongside pleas for religious tolerance and the ending of poverty (rather naively expressed), Dennett includes statements that reflect a stark misapprehension of contemporary reality. To cite one example: “Consider the current situation in Iraq,” he says, “where a security force is supposed to provide a temporary scaffolding on which to construct a working society in post-Saddam Iraq. It might actually have worked from the outset if the force had been large enough and well enough trained and deployed to reassure people without having to fire a shot.”

This is written as though the war against Iraq was, or ought to have

been, an exercise in benevolence! We would not suggest that these statements make Dennett some sort of pro-imperialist ideologue. But he seems to take at face value much of what passes for political wisdom among the elites in the US, at least as articulated by the Democratic Party. Dennett's belief that the US military is in Iraq to establish a "working society" is all the more striking given that a clear majority, even in the US, is openly hostile to the war and highly suspicious of the official reasons—i.e., the lies—given to justify it.

Notwithstanding these important qualifications, however, the appearance of *Breaking the Spell* is certainly to be welcomed. To the extent that Dennett's proposal for scientific scrutiny of religion is taken forward, particularly if informed by a real familiarity with the Marxist tradition, the intellectual stranglehold of religion in contemporary life will be undermined.



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