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Daniel C. Dennett, BREAKING THE SPELL: RELIGION AS A NATURAL PHENOMENON

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BOOK REVIEWS

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon, by Daniel C. Dennett. New York: Viking, 2006. Pp. xvi, 448. $25.95.

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Dennett's provocatively titled book has a very sober aim: namely, to investigate the question of whether one can offer an adequate naturalistic account of the origins of religion. Since the title of the book might invite various misunderstandings, let me begin with three specific notes of clarification regarding Dennett's thesis. First, Dennett distinguishes between two religious 'spells.' On the one hand, there is (among some of the religious) a spell that inhibits members from engaging in a "dispassionate, forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many" (p. 17; cf. pp. 23, 47). On the other hand, there is a spell by which members see their religion as a source of life-enriching allure and comfort (cf. p. 47). Dennett's goal in this book is to break the former spell. Second, by 'religion,' Dennett has in mind various social systems "whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent" or agents "who play a central role in the way the [members of the religion] think about what they ought to do" (pp. 9, 11–12). Thus, Dennett's target in this book is, principally, theistic religions. Third, in saying that he wants to investigate whether religion is a natural phenomenon, Dennett means merely that he wants to investigate whether one can account for 'religion,' in Dennett's sense, as "a human phenomenon composed of events, organisms, objects, structures, patterns, and the like that all obey the laws of physics or biology, and hence do not involve miracles" (p. 25). Thus, the central aim of Dennett's text is to persuade people to understand, to engage in, and to take seriously the implications of an investigation of the natural origins of those social systems whose participants claim both to believe in a supernatural agent(s) and to guide their lives in accordance with the dictates of such an agent(s).

Dennett divides his project into three parts. In the first part (chapters 1–3), he states his thesis and tries to motivate his readers to engage in such an investigation. His case for the project is a reasonable one: religion is

such an important social, political, and economic phenomenon that we ought to subject it "to the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet" (pp. 14–15; cf. pp. 27, 30–31, 39). There are, however, two issues from the first part of the text that will likely trouble many readers. The first is Dennett's definition of 'religion,' which some will view as excessively narrow since it excludes certain major religions—e.g., Theravada Buddhism. The second is the tone and style of the text, which is far more colloquial than academic. Neither of these, however, strikes me as a powerful critique of his project. Regarding the first issue, if Dennett were trying to develop a fully adequate definition of 'religion,' he would clearly have failed, but that is *not* his aim. He merely offers his "working definition" of 'religion' to identify the object whose origins his hypothesis attempts to explain: namely, theistic religions. Regarding the second issue, if Dennett had written a book for an academic audience, he would clearly have chosen a manner of presentation that is inappropriate. According to Dennett, however, his target audience is not narrowly limited to members of the academy, but is much wider and includes (perhaps especially) religious believers, to whom Dennett wants to serve as an "ambassador," introducing the scientific analysis of religion (pp. 23–24).

In the second part (chapters 4–8), he describes a provisional hypothesis, by which one might hope to explain religion as a natural phenomena. Three aspects of this section strike me as problematic.

The first is Dennett's decision to cast the project in terms of 'memetics.' The idea is, very roughly, as follows. A 'meme' is "an element of culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means," and 'memes' satisfy Darwin's criteria for evolution by natural selection: replication, variation, and differential fitness (pp. 341, 345). Since religion is a 'meme,' it too can be explained in terms of natural selection.

Casting the project in these terms is worrisome for at least two reasons. One is that the identity conditions for 'memes' are unclear: Are religious concepts 'memes'? Are religious doctrines 'memes'? Are religious practices 'memes'? Is a religion itself a 'meme,' or is it a collection of 'memes'? If the latter, which 'memes' are the ones that are essential to a given religion? The other is that the objects of selection in evolutionary biology (e.g., genes or physical organisms), on the one hand, and 'memes,' on the other, are disanalogous in an important way: the latter satisfy Darwin's third criterion only in a metaphoric sense.

Dennett attempts to address concerns such as these in the book's appendices. Some will find these attempted clarifications satisfying. Others, however, will view Dennett's decision to employ the language of 'memetics' as problematic since it makes his project seem like something less than the rigorous scientific hypothesis for which they might have hoped. This worry, though, may ultimately be one that concerns more the *manner* in which Dennett presents the hypothesis than with the *matter* of the hypothesis itself.

The second, however, does concern the hypothesis itself. In admittedly all-too-brief form, Dennett's story of the natural history of religion runs as follows. Human beings have a 'fiction-generating contraption,' which consists of a 'hyperactive agent detective device' (HADD) and a weakness for committing to memory certain wondrous notions. This 'contraption' gave rise to people's ideas of supernatural agents (see, e.g., pp. 109–114, 119–126, 131). As recent findings suggest, at least some people are genetically susceptible to hypnotization, which shaman utilized and exploited during healing rituals. These factors helped to produce folk religions—i.e., those religions that have no written creeds, no theologians, and no hierarchy of officials (p. 140). The central concepts and practices of folk religions were copied reliably, despite some variations, from one generation to the next with the aid of rituals, which served as memory aids (see pp. 142, 147–149). Eventually, just as folk music gave rise to what we might call "organized music" with symphonies, concert halls and so forth, so too did folk religion give rise to organized religion (pp. 153–154). These organized religions began developing doctrines, which the leaders ensured would be systematically immune to disconfirmation by fostering a culture of secrecy (pp. 161, 164–165). In time, such organized religions were further "domesticated" when they were adopted by political leaders to support their regimes (pp. 171–173). Some religions were able to survive, while their competitors were not, because they helped certain *groups* become better equipped for natural selection than others (pp. 184–185).

This hypothesis, as Dennett seems to acknowledge, is quite speculative and rather difficult to test (see, e.g., p. 310), but this worry is not necessarily a fatal objection to his project since the aim in the second section of his book is rather modest. He merely intends "to tell *the best current version* of the story science can tell about how religions have become what they are" (p. 103, Dennett's emphasis) in the hope of motivating readers to investigate the claim that religion is a natural phenomenon.

The third concerns Dennett's discussion (in chapter 8) of whether the religious actually *believe* what they *profess*. He argues that the religious do not know what they profess and that they believe not *in God* but *in belief in God*. The argument, however, relies on at least two claims that, although they might be true of some religious groups, do not seem to represent the majority of the great monotheistic religions. One is the claim that the religious are prohibited from critically examining their faith (see, e.g., p. 206ff.). The other is the claim that even religious experts admit that when it comes to God, "*they themselves* cannot use their expertise to prove—even to one another—that they know what they are talking about" (p. 220, Dennett's emphasis). At least two millennia of philosophical and theological discourse suggest that the first claim is misleading. The problem with the second claim is that it relies on an inaccurate representation of the statements of such experts about the incomprehensibility of God. To say that God is 'incomprehensible' might mean, in a stronger sense, that one cannot *understand anything* about God, or it might mean, in a weaker sense, that

one cannot *know everything* about God. When religious experts—at least the ones with which I am familiar, such as Alston, Bradshaw, Engelhardt, Plantinga, Swinburne, etc.—say that God is incomprehensible, they are using the term in something like the latter sense. Contrary to what Dennett suggests, they seem perfectly capable of demonstrating, at least to other experts, that "they know what they are talking about."

Nonetheless, my suspicion is that Dennett correctly suggests that many, perhaps the overwhelming majority, of the religious do not understand in a technical, philosophical sense the doctrines they profess and, hence, that they do not believe them in a technical, philosophical sense. Whether they 'believe,' or have 'faith,' in some other sense is an interesting question and one that has received a fair amount of attention both from philosophers and from theologians—see, e.g., Alston, Muyskens, Pojman, Plantinga, Pruss, etc.; cf. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther. Unfortunately, however, Dennett addresses only a very limited sample of the literature on this topic. Thus, his discussion of belief in God, though interesting and important, is rather misleading and underdeveloped.

In the third part (chapters 9–11), Dennett turns his attention to questions about the professed benefits of religion and about the practical implications of his hypothesis. There is much that is of interest in this section, but (in the interest of brevity) let me highlight just two particularly important claims. One is that if religions are going to claim to have physical or moral benefits, they should subject their claims to scientific scrutiny. The other is that the religious must stand up, forcefully and effectively, to the extremists in their midst who foster ignorance or evil in the name of their religion.

In summary, Dennett's fans will likely be disappointed to the extent with which Dennett sacrifices rigor for accessibility, and the readers he desires most to reach will likely find his writing style objectionable, in part because he likes to "tease" (p. 412n18) and in part because he is both less than fully accurate in representing and less than fully charitable in dealing with the positions with which he disagrees (see, e.g., pp. 227–228, 268, 365). Nonetheless, everyone should share his stated goal: to discover the truth about the world's religions (see, e.g., p. 311f., 319). Thus, whatever its shortcomings in substance and in style, *Breaking the Spell* is worth reading for those who are interested in a provocative and accessible survey of "the best current version" of the naturalistic study of religion.

The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment, by Alexander R. Pruss. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii and 335. $88.00 (Cloth).

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Leibniz tells us that the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), along with the law of non-contradiction, is one of the two principles upon which we