

## Book Review

*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* by Daniel C. Dennett, Allen Lane, Penguin Books Ltd., London, 2006, xiv + 448 pages, Hardcover, £25.

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*Breaking the Spell* is about religion and the spell it holds over the minds of many people. The book is engagingly written, full of interesting snippets of biological information and telling philosophical analogies. One of the best of these analogies is a comparison of love of music with love of God. On the face of it, the broad thrust and intention of this long book is reasonably clear. On reflection that clarity disappeared, for this reviewer at least. I am left wondering if I am misinterpreting the book, or if Dennett has produced something complex, even quite brilliant, but centered on a flaw in judgment.

Any review of *Breaking the Spell* is likely to say more about the reviewer than about the book. This is true of many books, but is especially true of this one. People devoted to religion in one form or another are almost bound to be hostile to it. That certainly is not Dennett's intention. I assume that it is precisely the believers, and those who turn their backs on evolutionary thinking, that Dennett is trying to reach. Yet the hostility in many reviews, and rather ill informed hostility at that, would suggest that the strategy adopted in this book has not been entirely successful. On the other hand, this may be unfair. Maybe nothing could bring people of that cast of mind to the table for reasonable discussion. Other critics give us the tired old arguments about there being more to life than science. It is difficult to see how anyone could accuse Dennett on that charge, yet they do.

The phrase 'breaking the spell' turns out to be somewhat ambiguous. It could mean persuading believers to abandon their religion. That is not the meaning Dennett has in mind most of the time. But it is what he means at some points:

...we could suggest to them that the claims of *any* religion should be taken with a grain of salt... False advertising is false advertising, and if we start holding religious organisations accountable for their claims — not by taking them to court but just by pointing out in a matter-of-

fact tone of voice, that of course these claims are ludicrous — perhaps we can slowly get the culture of credulity to evaporate. (Page 335)

Throughout most of this book, 'breaking the spell' has a different meaning. It means encouraging thinking about religion as a natural phenomenon, as Dennett puts it. This means that we bring the same kind of thought and evidence to bear on our understanding of religion as we bring to bird migration and volcanic eruptions. It does not mean questioning the content of religious faith. Here is an example of that position:

The spell that I say *must* be broken is the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many. But certainly one of the most pressing and plausible reasons for resisting this claim is the fear that if that spell is broken — if religion is put under the bright lights and the microscope — there is a serious risk of breaking a different and much more important spell: the life-enriching enchantment of religion itself. If interference caused by scientific investigation somehow disabled people, rendering them incapable of states of mind that are springboards for religious experience or religious conviction, this *could* be a terrible calamity. (Page 18)

On my reading these two passages are inconsistent with each other. One says that the content of religion is on the whole 'ludicrous' and we should work towards evaporating the culture of faith and credulity. That is what we mean by breaking the spell. Incidentally, this is a position with which I very much agree. The other says let us adopt the very modest position of asking for a particular kind of investigation of religion which in no way passes judgement on the content of religious ideology. Breaking the spell merely means having a look, a scientific look, at religion. Many other similar pairings of contrasting passages can be found in this book,

By way of explaining these contradictions, I shall now venture into an area where my better judgement tells me I should not go, namely, taking a guess about Dennett's motivation in writing this book. I believe his motivation is fear of actions that are being taken by believers, and fear of worse actions that might yet be taken by them. Again, incidentally, I share these fears. Educated rational people do not much like irrationality, on the whole, and for atheists, religion falls into the latter category. So we are always troubled by religion. But it is not the unfortunate and misguided states of mind of believers which is motivating this book. It is the fear of what they might get up to.

I am fairly convinced that Dennett feels that the world would be a better and safer place if fewer people held religious views. I think he is right. He has written a book which would seem to be addressed to believers, and so he favours a “softly-

softly” approach so as not to frighten them off. I think this is a mistaken strategy. Almost every known argument against belief in God is raised at one point or another in the book. Sometimes this is done subtly and sometimes less so. Dennett has not managed to hide his hostility to religion in an effective manner. Nor should he try to do that, in my view. I think it would be better to be up front about this. I explain the inconsistency referred to above as coming from Dennett's decision to attempt to catch the believers unawares.

Throughout this book, the plea is that the problem of religion should be addressed by more research. The claim in the book is that up to now we have not had much research into religion, and that more would help a great deal. I find it hard to agree with either proposition. First, Dennett on the need for research:

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. (Page 18)

What can one say, other than, that this is just not the case? The claim might make some sense if by 'scientists' Dennett means evolutionary biologists, a rather narrow use of the term. But he does say that 'other researchers' have also been involved in the pact to leave religion largely unexamined. Dennett does acknowledge the existence of such journals as the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and related publications. And he sees part of his goal being to facilitate interaction and collaboration between investigators. But I think it is a serious mistake to suggest that the scientific study of religion is something approaching virgin territory.

Whether I am right about this or not, and I will have a bit more to say on it shortly, the main thrust of Dennett's call for more research has to do with promoting an evolutionary framework for examining religion. This is highly likely to be a fruitful suggestion. Of course, the purpose of this book is not to undertake that research, but rather to advocate that it be undertaken. Here Dennett is on firmer ground when he suggests that not nearly enough research along evolutionary lines has been conducted so far.

There are two examples in this book of using evolutionary ideas in the modern sense to aid thinking about religion. The first is the concept of memes which occurs almost as a throwaway idea in Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*. Memes, for Dawkins and for the subsequent meme literature, are not explicitly directed to religion, but it is a natural application. Memes are units of culture, ideas in peoples' minds. Through imitation, persuasion and inculcation, memes can pass from person to person. Presumably they can come from reading as well. Unlike genes, they are not transmitted through sexual reproduction. People acquire memes after they are born, and can lose them as well. Some memes may replace others during a lifetime, which is not the case for genes.

The specific content of the meme concept is not examined in this book. The term implies a useful analogy, and so it may be. For this to be established, we would have to see how it differs from, and hopefully improves upon, or at least supplements, other theories of cultural transmission. Popular contenders are the ideas of Boyd and Richerson, Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman and others, along with epidemiological models. (Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*, University of Chicago, 1985; L.L. Cavalli-Sforza and M.W. Feldman, *Cultural Transmission and Evolution: A Quantitative Approach*, Princeton, 1981.) Both books explicitly reject memes as being helpful for understanding the spread of culture, which would include religious culture. Dennett presumably rejects their rejections, but there is no discussion of this. A number of writers have worried about whether elements of culture can be thought of as discrete units, insofar as genes are discrete units. Genes operate in coalitions, and no doubt memes do as well. In order for the meme concept to help our understanding, there needs to be something rather like the operations of genes in their behaviour. Dennett does not take the step of attempting to identify these possible features, but he does make repeated use of the meme notion in discussing the spread of religious ideas.

*Breaking the Spell* contains an important sub-section based on Nicholas Humphrey's work on the indoctrination of children. ("What Shall We Tell the Children?" in Wes Williams, ed., *The Values of Science*, Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1997.) Evolutionary insights into family structure and children's long period of dependence on adults sets the stage. That children are particularly open and vulnerable to suggestion is not the exclusive province of Darwinian thinking, but an evolutionary approach adds depth and detail to this critical consideration. Of course some children later in life manage to escape from early indoctrination, but this is unusual, not easy to accomplish, and can entail psychological cost. We are inclined to place limits on what parents can do to children of a physical nature. Might there not be a case for restricting the authority of parents to impose ideas on their children?

As to Dennett's assertion that researchers have shied away from studying religion, my contention is that this can only apply to research from an evolutionary perspective. There are volumes and volumes of research which are not explicitly Darwinian in tone. As a first step in filling the gap in the kind of research he would like to see undertaken, Dennett poses a number of questions:

What were our ancestors like before there was anything like religion? Were they like bands of chimpanzees? What, if anything did they talk about, aside from food, predators, and the mating game? Do the burial practices of Neanderthals show that they must have had fully articulate language? Could an ape (without language) *concoct* the counterintuitive combination of a walking tree or an invisible banana? Why don't other species have art? Why do we human beings so consistently focus on the fantasies of our ancestors? Does impromptu hypnosis work as effectively when the hypnotist is not the parent?

How well have nonliterate cultures preserved their rituals and creeds over the generations? How did healing rituals arise? Does there have to be someone to prime the pump? (What is the role of charismatic innovators in the origin of religious groups?) For how long could folk religion be carried along by our ancestors before reflection began to transform it? How and why did folk religions metamorphose into organised religions?

I think these are potentially useful questions. But in my view it would have been helpful and appropriate for Dennett to note that closely related questions have been on the research agenda for a century or more. As just one example, the work of James Frazer springs to mind. (*The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Abridged Edition, Macmillan, 1922.) This body of work, reported in some thirteen lengthy volumes, touches on Dennett's interests at innumerable points. To select just one, take the movement from folk religion to formal religion. Frazer discusses the origins of a certain Hindu ceremony which can be found in Hindu homeopathic magic. (Page 15) Literally hundreds of examples of the movement from magic to religion can be found in Chapter IV on Magic and Religion. Chapter XVII similarly addresses the role of charismatic innovators. A quote from Frazer's concluding thoughts is informative:

If then we consider, on the one hand, the essential similarity of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times, and on the other hand, the wide differences between the means he has adopted to satisfy them in different ages, we shall perhaps be disposed to conclude that the movement of the higher thought, so far as we can trace it, has on the whole been from magic through religion to science...Every great advance in knowledge has extended the sphere of order and correspondingly restricted the sphere of apparent disorder in the world where chance and confusion still reign, a fuller knowledge would everywhere reduce the seeming chaos to cosmos...But while science has this much in common with magic that both rest on a faith in order as the underlying principle of all things, readers of this work will hardly need to be reminded that the order presupposed by magic differs widely from that which forms the basis of science...the order on which magic reckons is merely an extension, by false analogy, of the order in which ideas present themselves to our minds, the order laid down by science is derived from patient and exact observation of the phenomena themselves. (Page 711)

The important point is that Frazer does not pluck these observations out of the air. They are supported by voluminous research on the origins and nature of religion and magic. Sadly, in spite of all this work, Frazer gets the future entirely wrong.

Like many optimists, he sees science replacing religion smoothly and without much struggle; lots of people thought the same. So did I, but it has not worked out that way. Why not? Perhaps research will tell us why, and thereby help to reduce the threat of religious violence. But I am not as confident as Dennett that research, even successful research, will break the spell. (Incidentally, is it not wonderful how Frazer anticipates chaos theory in the passage quoted?)

Dennett gives very little attention to other means than research as ways of addressing religious bigotry and closed mindedness. While the book is about how we might break the spell that religion holds, it is not about any and all means of doing this. Many might feel that using instruments of public policy could have an impact. For Dennett, however, this is not really the point. His book is about breaking the spell through exposure to evolutionary science. There are one or two exceptions to this general theme:

Instead of trying to destroy the madrassahs that close the minds of thousands of young Muslim boys, we should create alternative schools — for Muslim boys *and girls* — that will better serve their real and pressing needs, and let these schools compete openly with the madrassahs for clientele. (Page 335)

Somewhat oddly, this is about all that Dennett has to say about education. There is no discussion of faith schools. There is no discussion of the French policy of forbidding religious clothing and symbols like Yamahas or crosses on the part of students. Muslims have so far said little about the loss of freedom of expression for Jews and Christians, but see these rules as matters for them alone. Dennett does not comment, although he does acknowledge that apart from issues of research, there is a huge public policy issue regarding religion:

In this century it will be our memes, both tonic and toxic that will wreak havoc on the unprepared world. Our capacity to tolerate the toxic excesses of freedom cannot be assumed in others, or simply be exported as one more commodity. The practically unlimited educability of any human being gives us hope of success, but designing and implementing the cultural inoculations necessary to fend off disaster, while respecting the rights of those in need of inoculation, will be an urgent task of great complexity, requiring not just better social science but also sensitivity, imagination, and courage. The field of public health expanded to include cultural health will be the greatest challenge of the next century. (Page 331)

Chapter eight on "Belief in Belief" is the most philosophical in this book. An interesting and convincing argument is advanced that not only we cannot know what

other people believe, believers themselves do not know what they believe. For Dennett it follows that proving or disproving the existence of God is something of a mugs game. Not only is it hard to do, but because of the nature of belief, it is not of great importance. What does matter is what people profess.

I am a little unsure about how this position sits with the view Dennett expresses that atheists could do with a new term to identify themselves in popular discussion. He wants to promote the word 'brights' to describe atheists, much as 'gays' replaced homosexuals in normal usage. Although I am all in favour of making it easier to hold and express atheistic views in popular discussion, I doubt if a new term will help, and am more doubtful that it will catch on. I have three reasons for this. First, gay is a cheerful and modest term, whereas bright is cold and immodest. Second, although homosexual is a mouthful and a little embarrassing, atheist is a perfectly good term to describe those who do not believe; it is also descriptively accurate, which cannot really be said of gay. Finally, changes in language are rarely engineered from above. We shall see.

*Breaking the Spell* is a large and ambitious book. It addresses a subject of terrifying importance. For me the basic question about this book is who is it intended for? Researchers are unlikely to need persuading on most of the points being made. Perhaps some will come to adopt a more Darwinian approach to their work. This could be helpful. Philosophers will be familiar with much of what is in the book. The big and target audience, it seems to me, must be those who profess a religious point of view, be they religious officials or their followers. But will they read this book? Will black-sheep atheists in religious families give it to devout aunts as Christmas presents in the hopes that they will read it and eventually give up their religion? I doubt it. It is too long. It does not succeed in hiding its contempt for religion, and it shies away from an honest wrestling match with believers. Nothing would please me more than to be proved wrong on this point. If a great debate is stimulated, that will be an extraordinary and wonderful outcome.

People accuse Dawkins of ranting in his TV programmes attacking religion. I think that is unfair: He was not ranting, nor is Dennett. By normal dinner table manners, this is agreeable writing (with too much use of brackets). I sincerely hope that it will help, if only a little, in furthering the objectives of atheists, and of others who fear religious violence and oppose religious repression. It is far from easy to know what to do. The strategy of this book is, in my view, a little underhanded and that will not help it to succeed. The most honest aspect is the title: religion holds a spell over people. Science, moreover, is not just another belief system, like religion, as some reviewers maintain. Science is endlessly willing to question its findings, its methods, its institutions, and all other aspects. Dennett hopes to bring a similar ethic to religion. Breaking the spell is a vital task. Whether Dennett is able to do that or not, and most regrettably I rather think not, we have to applaud the intention.