

BOOK REVIEW

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon, by Daniel Dennett. (Viking Penguin Group: New York, NY.) Cloth. 448 pp. 2006. ISBN: 0-67003472-X.

Ten years ago Dennett came out with this bestseller. He was primarily concerned with demolishing two ideas that seemingly cast a spell among most human beings. The first spell is the taboo that forbids investigation into religion. The second spell is religion per se, or more to the point, the idea that such an examination into religion could sweep it away, along with its positive attributes, thus leaving the world worse than it is.

Early in the book, the author notes that many non-Americans have complained that the tome is American-centered. Dennett concedes the point but does not believe this is such a big deal. However, he also concedes that his worldview is centered on “First World” peoples. The fact, though, is that religion is a worldwide phenomenon, and to focus so narrowly on the U.S. and the West detracts from the book – but not much.

The author deals with many highly speculative and controversial ideas throughout the book, especially the notion that memes exist. “Meme” is a word coined by evolutionary biologist and New Atheist leader Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. Memes are believed to be the cultural equivalent of genes, transmitting ideas, practices and behaviors from person to person. The more controversial proponents of the meme theory believe that memes actually reside in the brain.

Some scholars believe that religion is a meme and that it is transmitted naturally. Dennett asserts that all religions have a “*systematic* invulnerability to disproof...” (p. 163.) Indeed, this is the genius of religion. No matter how much scientific evidence one might adduce against the existence of God, in the minds of believers, it is never strong enough. Believers assert that God cannot be tested, prayer studies cannot provide evidence against God, trips to outer space will not do the trick, knowledge of star formation does not count, evolution by natural selection is rejected, understanding how natural disasters occur is not impressive, and so on. As Dennett informs the readers, folk religion in particular, “...allies itself with other items that have in one way or another put themselves out of the

reach of gnawing skepticism.” (ibid) Perhaps the best example from those items is culture.

Dennett discusses the idea that religions are like firms that are always trying to generate new business, (and might even be willing to crush the competition if possible.) He notes that religion thrives upon conflict, be it good or bad. A good example would be Martin Luther King using religion to fight for social justice. A bad example would be Osama bin Laden using religion to spread terror.

The author points out that, just as some people cannot tolerate lactose or handle alcohol, some people – and the rest of the world – would be better off if they just said no to religion. He writes that some religionists cannot “‘metabolize’ [doctrines] the way other people can. (They become manic and out of control, or depressed, or hysterical, or confused, or addicted.)” (p. 318) This is an incredibly important and sobering idea that could bring much peace to the world – the idea that some people should leave the religion alone. However, how would it fly with most religious people, especially highly influential religious leaders?

Dennett also calls attention to a little discussed fact about non-Americans and their antipathy toward U.S. popular culture. He writes:

“The hatred of this potent American export is often driven by racism – because of the strong Afro-American presence in American pop culture – and sexism – because of the status of women we celebrate and our (relatively) benign treatment of homosexuality. (p. 331)

This is something of which progressive should be much more aware. The usual knee-jerk response is to identify with and support any group outside the U.S. that attacks US cultural imperialism. However, in many cases, these attacks come from people that simply want to defend their reactionary, bigoted way of life.

Getting back to religion, the author notes that many religionists keep scientists from studying religion by deeming it in bad taste to question the believer. “This tactic exploits the widespread desire of people not to offend, a very effective way of disabling the critical apparatus of science.” (p. 364) By complaining about hurt feelings and alleged disrespect, religionists effectively shield themselves from the same kinds of investigations to which most other areas are not immune.

This is great stuff. However, Dennett is regarded as one the Four Horsemen, along with Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. However, this seems almost unfair – and it is certainly inaccurate. Dennett is not polemical, as is the case with the other three. On the contrary, he offers an olive branch to religionists, and says to them, as the Bible says, “Come and let us reason together.” This is a clarion call to everyone to allow scholars to get on with the business of studying religion as we would any other natural phenomenon, and let the chips fall where they may.

It sounds good to me.