

Breaking the Spell

Religion as a natural phenomenon

D.Dennett

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This book is intended for the kind of reader, who probably would not read it. The author is well aware of that, and in the first part he pleads with the potential reader, to please hear his case out, before rejecting him.

So what kind of reader does the author have in mind? Obviously an American reader, not necessarily a Fundamentalist, but a religious person, who holds certain things sacred, and probably is made uncomfortable by the fact of Evolution. Thus a misguided reader, one who has to be informed, educated, and made to transcend his ingrained methods of thoughts. It is quite unlikely that anyone mired in such ingrained furrows will heed the rather modest admonishments the author seems fit to met out.

It is unlikely that such a book would ever have been written, except in America. Where else can you find the same breed of complacent religiosity as well as militant anti-secularism, although what made the States in the first place such a haven for the persecuted and such a advanced liberal entity being its secularism, that in separating the State from the Church, and clearly assigning matters of religion to the purely personal sphere, it thus made possible a general tolerance of different creeds, so called religious freedom. Something, along with representative democracy and scientific development is seen as one of the truly progressive achievements of Western mankind.

What is the purpose of the Book? Richard Dawkins in his quests makes no beans about his objectives. Religion is evil. It is a parasitic so called meme, an entity, which has found the brains of people a congenial environment for reproduction and dispersal. According to Dawkins, religion should be stamped out. It is not just a matter of being out of date, it is false to the core, pernicious and dangerous and mankind would be much better without it. Dawkins in other words is not really a champion of religious freedom. Religion should not exist, although he is not prepared to go beyond rational argument and the appeal to reason, to further his aims. Dennett is less forthcoming, pedals softer, but yet in the end his agenda is the same, and also his characterization of religion as a meme. His ambition though is to some extent to explain religion, because by explaining it, laying its nature bare, it will be demystified and as such emasculated, and left to die out by itself, when there are no longer any minds willing to support it. Hence the subtitle of the book. Religion as a natural phenomenon. Nothing supernatural, just something amendable to explanation and disclosure. However, in this quest, he is far from being a pioneer. Religion in Western Society has been under scrutiny since the Age of the Enlightenment. Starting with the 19th century, the sacred texts were now subjected to the same kind of historical investigation that formerly had been the case of the profane. There exists a large literature, in which religion, especially the Christian variety, is seen to have developed historically, and how its sacred texts are not as canonical as one naively may

have believed, nor that its truths are those of revelations, but those of contingencies with clear ties to other, supposedly more primitive religious traditions. In short, religion being something not divine, but just a human social construct. To anyone with some vestige of religious feeling, reading a clear-headed factual account of a particular religion is much more disturbing than to read an all-out attack. An attack may ironically rather strengthen the case for a religion, by making it somehow more real; while this kind of impartial survey, may simply erode by digestion¹. In the words of Dennett - 'breaking the spell'. But of this tradition, much of it actually developed by theologians, Dennett has not much to say². Perhaps he is ignorant, perhaps he finds it tainted by its theological progenies, or simply feels that it can be short-circuited by modern science, especially by Evolution and its many modern developments.

Religion is superstition. This is how most children are introduced to religion, and it as such religions opposition towards science is generally understood. Thus in its milder varieties religion shares many features with the innocent not to say totally innocuous belief in Santa Claus. Something to grow out of, a comforting illusion to be shed by any responsible adult. And this is very much the take taken by the author, that religion is a dissemination of untruth, and so far as of not downright lies, the result of wishful thinking with its intellectual underpinnings being mere obfuscation by confused or cynical (or both?) theologians, presenting nothing but nonsensical gibberish. The ostensible anthropomorphic claims of religion, namely that of a personal being, omnipotent and taking a human interest in the petty affairs of his devotees, are of course ridiculous, and few educated people, would admit socially to such beliefs, and I suspect even less so privately.

This comes to the core of the matter. Why is such a book written? Society is secular, religious misconceptions are not allowed to interfere with scientific and technological best practices. Does religion really play any fundamental role in decision makings nowadays³? Dennett seems to think so. Along with Dawkins he sees religion, the fundamental, not pussyfooting variety, as dangerous, and as a very palpable threat to our cherished values. To me this seems just another variation on the hysterical fear of terrorism that has recently strangled politicians and commentators. Religion supposedly being the supporting soil for extremism, and by rooting it out, the danger of terrorism will be undercut.

It is true that religious wars have caused much grief to mankind during the ages, but so have other kinds of wars, and it is not clear how much in a religious war is due to religious fervour and how much is due to more prosaic power politics, with the latter exploiting the potentials of the former. And certainly there have been enough strife in the world not motivated by religion, in fact until fairly recently the great worry of mankind

¹ Even a stable unbeliever as myself may be up for some unexpected jolt, as I experienced reading Vidals 'Julian' a few years ago, reviewed in November 2003

² Really the only possible references to such a tradition would be the work of William James on varieties of religious experience, to which Dennett refers appreciatively, finding in him a kindred spirit and a pioneer.

³ If so only in America. The total indifference of the religious right on matters ecological, as we are about to witness the second coming any day anyway, is notorious, and there are intermittently great concerns that such deluded thinking may diffuse all the way to the White House, where a recent incumbent surrounded himself with astrologers, but with the damage supposedly marginal, as the incumbent was seen as something of a dummy.

was annihilation by nuclear holocaust, brought about not by religious fanaticism, but by 'Real Politik' and bitter ideological conflicts of a most secular kind. In fact at the time religion, especially when brewing behind the Iron Curtain, was seen as a source of hope and moderation, breaking the spell of ideological tyranny. One may nowadays argue that the greatest threat to mankind is not by extremist resorting to indiscriminate acts of terrorism⁴ but by unbridled consumerism, the pivot around which the world economy seems to rotate faster and faster. If religion would stem such excesses, even at the price of intermittent acts of terrorism⁵ would not this mean that on the balance its forces for good (whatever that is) outweigh its bad sides, irrespective of its superstitious basis. Of course this is provocatively formulated, and meant to arrest and give some offence.

Such an instrumental view of religion may strike many people, even many unbelievers, as offensive. But yet it is one aspect of religion that Dennett professes to take seriously and treat with respect. Religion undoubtedly has made the life of many of its believers meaningful to themselves and useful to others. Through religious faith their adherents have been able to transcend themselves and been able to do great things. Even if it is all based on delusions, would not this be enough for us to protect, maybe even encourage its practices, in spite of the intellectual reservations we may harbour? Furthermore religion is close to art, in fact much of the greatest art throughout the centuries have been motivated by religious inspiration⁶. Dennett is a professed lover of music, and admits that he is rather soft when it comes to the rituals of religion, the hypnotic beauty of which he is more than ready to admit a weakness for. Yet the bottom line is that those beneficial aspects of religion can also be achieved without the suggestive inspiration religious delusions spawn. In the end we have to be adult and look reality square in the face. Exactly how such substitutes would be created, Dennett is less forthcoming on, going no further than offering people like himself as educated and informed role models⁷. The problems with substitutes are that by definition they are not the 'real' thing.

The major thrust of the authors undertaking is to 'break the spell' by revealing the natural underpinnings of religion. Thus he devotes a large part of its bulk to discuss various explanations why religion has come to play such a role in the history of mankind. His ambition is not to present a scholarly exposition of the history of religion, but instead to take a cold-headed view of costs and benefits. Why do people join a religion? Many people have indeed proposed an economical explanation, not in terms of money of course, but as in evolution generally, in terms of resources. It costs to believe in the arcane teachings of a creed and to submit to the rigors of participation, (incidentally the most taxing demands put on a believer in an active religious community) but it pays in the kind of benefit such as

⁴ My complacency on this score would of course be severely undercut if I would in the most unlikely scenario become a hapless victim myself, or more objectively disturbingly, if individual terrorists would acquire so called weapons of mass destruction and be at liberty to detonate those at their pleasure. I do consider those scenarios farfetched though.

⁵ such as say scaring people away from flying

⁶ The Music of Bach is a prime example. I recall a colleague of mine, an unbeliever himself, who ventured the opinion that in order to really appreciate the music of Bach you had to be deeply religious.

⁷ Dennett actually wants to mint the term *bright* modeled on *gay* appropriated by the homosexuals, to designate moral non-believers like himself, supposedly belonging to a somewhat embattled minority

a faith in an eternal after-life⁸. Such considerations naturally brings up the psychological benefits of religious persuasion, and leads to the intellectually quite murky quagmire of so called evolutionary psychology, where 'Just-So' stories are enthusiastically manufactured, without the constraints of falsifications⁹. The tone of this part of the book is rather superficial not to say trivializing, with constant references to rigorous scientific methods and the need to undertake more studies. I would suspect that this is the part most readers would take exception to, regardless of being believers or non-believers, revealing the kind of well-intentioned naivety Europeans so often disparage Americans of harbouring.

The most interesting part of the book is when Dennett approaches religion from a philosophical point of view, an approach one would think would be most congenial to him, and where he could be at his most instructive, after all this is what he was trained for. As a starter one may ask what it means to believe in God, and how this can be distinguished from belief in the belief of God. Does God exist? And if so in what sense? We are here entering the realm of such classical philosophical arenas as ontology versus epistemology, to some merely engaging in hair-splitting, but to others involving having some real fun. The ontological proof of God, which exists in many variances of formulations, is beautifully concentrated in the succinct formula, that God is the perfect Being, and existence is an attribute of perfection. There is indeed something very beautiful about it, because do we not see God being created out of nothing in front of our eyes? That he is something of the truly inevitable? Such proofs can be seen, and in fact ought to be seen as mere plays on words, but plays on words are fun, and in fact playing is the ultimate human activity and words, in the sense of language, the ultimate human treasure. Such creations of the imaginations are close in spirit to the notion of All and Everything, in short forming the concept of all that exists, and thus vulnerable to self-reference and paradoxes of the well-known Russellian kind, so imaginatively employed by the likes of Cantor, Gdel and Turing (and to some providing the basic, not to say the only idea of logic). In short, although few people would if pressed be able to provide a very clear meaning of what God really is, at least the God they profess to believe, the meaning of the Notion of God seems to be almost innate. In Jungian terms we would speak of a so called Archetype, which Freud would explain as a projection of the super-ego on the celestial sphere, manifested as some universal father-figure¹⁰. Thus even if you do not believe in God, you may be annoyed at those who do, or profess to do so, even if logically speaking the non-existence of God would make any claims of his actual existence innocuous. In fact I remember from my own childhood as the scariest injunction, that of having to believe in him. If you do not believe in God you will be punished for it, not by your parents or teacher, but by God itself. Thus

⁸ Dennett never takes up the case of Pascal and his infinite wager, to the effect that the rewards promised by Christianity may be exceedingly unlikely, but if realised so powerful as to make it eminently worthwhile to take the risk, although it would have been quite apposite in the context.

⁹ In a sense there is testing, putting Popper on his head. In true Popperian spirit you would present a theory and derive various unknown consequences of it, and then put those consequences to test. Here you start with known consequences, and concoct a theory that explains those, with the given consequences retroactively then seen as confirmations.

¹⁰ There are of course also many tempting evolutionary explanations for the phenomenon, few of them as poetically fecund as those of the classical psychologists.

how could you dare not to believe in him, because if you do not, he will make himself very manifest to you, as only a punisher can make himself manifest¹¹.

Science stands in opposition to Religion because it is based on Reason not on blind Faith and its truths are practical and empirical and not based on revelation. Also, while Religion has to be taken whole or not at all, and abhor doubts, Science invites criticism not to say scepticism, and is in addition not only challenged and excited about it, but literally thrives on it. In Religion you know for certain and do not believe, in Science you do not know for certain, only believe. This may be a caricature, but as most caricatures bringing out the essentials at the cost of simplifying the nuances. And, as the reader no doubt has discovered, the caricature above bears the stamp of Russell. But if you look deeper the similarities between Science and Religion start to become more pronounced. Not that Science is another kind of Religion, far from it, the dissimilarities between Science and the various kind of Religions are far greater than between the latter among themselves, but simply that Science ultimately rests on some kind of Faith and permeated by some kind of Mystery that is second to none. But what does this really mean? Much nonsense has been written and claimed on the convergence of Science and Religion, most of it of a very sentimental kind, more in the nature of a fantasy.

When we probe deep enough the boundaries between Science, Philosophy, Religion and Poetry becomes rather blurred. To make a fanciful analogy, it is as if the four forces of physics are being united in the early stages of the Big Bang. This is a poetical statement of course, but by the assumption also a scientific one. In fact the analogy with the Big Bang is an apposite one, because in particular to Catholic theologians, the Big Bang, of something coming out of nothingness, is a miracle that fits so well with a religious perspective and puts God there, whatever it is, in the middle of it. We have to start somewhere. Even the classical rigours of mathematical argument have to start on some unquestionable assumptions, otherwise one would get nowhere, it is an inescapable feature of the game we are playing. This brings us to one of the basic notions, namely that of 'Truth'. We cannot really speak of 'Truth' as that somehow presupposes that we speak truly. We want to find out about it, and those who do not adhere to 'Truth' are going to get punished somehow. Does this not sound suspiciously like 'God'. Is 'God' really nothing but 'Truth'? That by lying we offend 'Truth' and this is really the most serious and insidious aspect of lying, not to gain advantages. Even if we cannot be found out in our lying, and no one will be affected by it, 'Truth' will nevertheless 'see' it. What we have here is something very abstract, shorn of every anthropomorphic vestige (except of course being perceivable by man¹²), yet being abstract does not mean not being 'real'. On the contrary. It can be very tangible.

'Truth' as a 'God' is of course not a new idea. In a sense this lies at the foundation of Platonism. Whether Plato and his disciples ever took the great soap opera of Greek mythology seriously is up to discussion, may be they paid lipservice to it, as most people nowadays pay lip-service to religious sensitivities, but what they were really concerned with

¹¹ The analogies with the Russell paradox should be clear to the reader. By not believing in him you will evoke his existence. Perhaps by believing in him, you may be left in peace, and thus able to ignoring him, i.e. not believing in him

¹² Do animals perceive 'Truth'? In a sense I guess, but they are probably not aware of it.

was 'Truth'. The life and teaching of Socrates have many similarities with that of Jesus. In the latter case people are admonished to seek and find 'God' by revelation, in the former case to seek 'Truth' through argument, and finding it (at least asymptotically) by the revelation that only rational argument can provide. There is 'Truth' and we can find it, endowed as we are by our powers of 'Reasoning'. Is this not the kind of creed any serious scientist would be able to underwrite? Is it religion? If so a most watered down variety, so abstract that it could in fact fit all sizes. But as noted above, what is abstract is not necessarily unpalpable. Dennett only passingly refer to such abstractions, referring them to as 'essentialism' and doubting whether they really should belong to religion at all¹³. On the other hand is this kind of abstract entity not what most serious theologians converge to? None of whom would be caught alive believing in 'Santa Claus'.

Another abstract but inescapable concept is that of 'Meaning'. What is the 'meaning' of 'Meaning'¹⁴ ? Obviously we cannot ask that question properly unless we already know the answer. Yet just as if with 'Truth' we seem to 'know' about it without the aid of language¹⁵. Unlike the stern case of 'Truth' we cannot readily identify the notion of 'Meaning' with 'God', instead 'Meaning' is something that is a consequence of 'God' so to speak his blessings. Often the value of religion is said to be residing in the way it infuses 'Meaning' to our existence. A life without religion is supposed to be meaningless. As Weinberg has put it, 'the more we learn about the Cosmos, the more meaningless it has become'¹⁶. But of course this is not necessarily meant as a reproach, but rather the depressing fact that Cosmic meaning (or lack thereof) does not necessarily coincide with Human meaning.

The great dividing line between Humanism and Naturalism, or maybe better between Humanism and Materialism, is whether to take a top-down or bottom-up approach. To a Humanist there can be no real distinction between meaning in the Cosmic sense and meaning in the Human sense, it is only the latter that makes sense to us, and which we have to take as our point of departure, as well as staying anchored to. To Materialists, when all is said and done (and there will be of course very much saying and doing before that), humans are just part of nature, ultimately the hapless consequences of material configurations. This is a view, which to many people is greatly abhorrent and bespeaks a lack of spirituality. And in what does this spirituality really consist of?

A text of whatever kind, consists of a sequence of letters, symbols which by themselves are meaningless. The meaninglessness of the symbols has of course no bearing upon the meaning of the text itself, this meaning is infused by us, human readers. In the same way one can argue that the religious, or rather transcendent interpretations, have no problem of conceiving men in particular to be built up by atoms, just as a text is built up by letters,

¹³ Buddhism is in an entirely different category from Christianity and Islam, both being sister religions, emanating from the same set of cultures; Buddhism is in fact a religion without a God in the traditional sense, a nihilistic and atheistic religion, as I found out to my horror as a young teenager.

¹⁴ Books on the subject has been written though, one with the catchy title of 'The meaning of meaning'

¹⁵ Or is this just a naive and sentimental illusion, is this all a matter of language play, that without language we would 'know' nothing? At least nothing of abstract concepts, which somehow are just emergent epiphenomena of language.

¹⁶ The First Three Minutes

but that the meaning of it all, its spiritual dimension so to speak, is infused externally by a 'God', just as we endow a long string of meaningless symbols, with a meaning, by putting it into an enlarged context. The ultimate mystery of why something exists rather than nothing is not one we can fathom, nor in any way constructively deal with. A more manageable mystery is that of meaning, and how out of chaos, meaningful order can ensue, without there being an intentional design of an external intelligence. Intellectually this is very satisfying, because it makes the matter of a material, and hence explainable and to some extent manipulative world, self-sufficient. There is no need to ask the question of who designed the Designer? This is Darwinism's great contribution to philosophical thought¹⁷.

Yet there are paradoxes of a self-referential kind here. Can the products of evolution truly understand evolution? Is there a kind of evolutionary pressure that makes the understanding of evolution advantageous? Such questions are of course nothing but a travesty of what the evolutionary insight is all about. The brain by itself is a feature of the real world, it may be made up of atoms, as everything else, as well as having an evolutionary history, but this does not mean that all of its features are 'designed' whether blindly or not. It exists, no matter how it came about, and its very existence has potentialities that are just there. Here Dennett comes very close to expressing a religious sentiment, be it of Platonism. Evolution is about exploring the potentialities of a huge configuration space. This configuration space, as opposed to the specific manifestations of particular paths taken into it, exists independent of time and space.

To be a dualist is a major intellectual sin, and few self-respecting philosophers would be associated with it. Dennett is no exception, as his books of consciousness illustrates. Yet in practice we are all dualists, somehow in our rational contemplation distancing ourselves from what we are contemplating. Our rational sense, our ability to form thoughts, are of course very high level phenomena, but we take them if not for granted, at least as inescapable and given. Our appreciation of Darwinism is basically an intellectual one, it fits so well, and thus it is endowed by our drive to impute meaning. And Darwinism is 'True', because it is true, not because it is a convenient social consensus; or at least this is how we consider it. Along with our rationality we have also other transcendent notions, like our sense of justice and morality, and also in recent time our extolling of democracy. Such transcendent notions are not necessarily in conflict with Darwinism (most Darwinists would take offense at even suggesting it), yet they are not subservient to it either, their possible materialistic explanations (if any such explanations would be comprehensible to us) in no way affecting how we deal with morality, justice and democracy. The impassioned study of evolution reveals, just as the impassioned study of the Cosmos, that it is inhuman, that it has no intrinsic meaning, and that we are in a sense haplessly thrown out into a void of total indifference. Thus it gives us no moral guidance, and thus we are thrown back to ourselves. Dawkins in his 'The Selfish Genes' talks about our duty as well as our possibility to transcend the mindless game of the perpetration of individual genes and

¹⁷ its contribution to biological thought maybe somewhat paradoxically less, although it gives to modern biology a cohesion that it formerly lacked, from a strict technical point of view, you can do excellent technical biological research, even if you sentimentally believe in an underlying intelligent Design, because evolution is an explanatory principle, it is not a kind of law that allows precise predictions, hence the temptations of evolutionary psychological speculations, referred to above.

shape the future according to our own purposes. Our own? Once again, regardless of progeny, we take our rational sense and our moral impulses as the guiding principle. It is a matter of a humanistic and hence to-down approach.

To conclude, there is a limit not only to human action, which is easier to comprehend, but also to human understanding, which by its nature is impossible to transcend. This provides a border out of which religion and religious contemplation springs, and without which there is no way religious sentiments and curiosity can be stamped out, save by formal designation. Such abstract notions, however tangible, may not have been what Dennett had in mind, but the more concrete manifestations are offshots of the same principle.

What Dennett proposes are discussions with theologians. The latter can always claim that anyone not thoroughly versed in theology is unqualified to make any pronouncements. This is interesting, because it does show in a sense that theological insights are seen to form a universe by itself, with no influence on the secular. Scientific findings have ramifications that involve us all, this lies at the heart of falsification, you do not need to be an expert to falsify a conclusion you have no clue as how it has been arrived at. But theology is not science, as Poppers well-known criterion shows, thus in order to discuss it, you need to some extent to enter sympathetically into its universe. Of this Dennett is well aware, and suggests that theologians should come up with criteria for those who should be deemed qualified to enter the debate. But, he adds, reminiscent of Turings test of artificial intelligence, those test should not be so demanding that the theologians themselves would be able to pass them! More generally the author invites rebuttals of his positions, with one caveat, that the opponents agree to play with nets. The nets constituting the minimal requirements for returns based on rational reasoning.

April 19-20, 2007 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*