

DANIEL DENNETT AND THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Daniel Dennett (2006) recently published a book, “Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon,” which advocates the scientific study of religion. Dennett is a philosopher with wide-ranging interests including evolution and cognitive psychology. This talk is basically a review of Dennett’s religion book, but it will include comments about other work about religion, some mentioned by Dennett and some not. I will begin by describing my personal interest in religion and philosophy, including some recent reading. Then I will comment about the study of religion, including the scientific study of religion. Then I will describe some of Dennett’s ideas about religion. I will conclude by trying outlining the ideas that should be considered in order to understand religion.

This talk is mostly about ideas, particularly religious beliefs, but not so much churches, creeds or religious practices. These other aspects of religion are important, and are the subject of study by a number of disciplines. I will mention some of the ways that people have studied religion, mainly to provide context for the particular ideas that I want to emphasize. I share Dennett’s reticence about defining religion. I will offer several definitions of religion, but religion is probably better defined by example than by attempting to specify its essence. A particular example of a religion is Christianity, even more particularly, Roman Catholicism.

MOTIVATION

My interest in philosophy and religion

I. Beginnings

I read a few books about religion and philosophy when I was in high school and imagined that college would be full of people arguing about religion and philosophy. I was terribly disappointed that college offered no such debates. I was a student at UMD and minored in Philosophy. There was only one professor, Henry Ehlers, and there was no such thing as a Philosophy major. The first philosophy course included quite a bit about the history of Christianity, and the second quarter of a year-long history of philosophy emphasized Scholastic philosophy. I thought that this was particularly interesting. Professor Ehlers said that this might have been because he had studied at Creighton. When I graduated, I thought that if I really wanted to understand the subjects that philosophy dealt with, I should study science to understand the facts, and psychology to understand thinking not based on facts.

About fifteen years ago Sabra Anderson, who was then a colleague in the Math Department and had served on a search committee in Philosophy, talked about how exciting it was to listen to the arguments that took place after Philosophy talks. I decided that I would go to some talks and find out for myself. Eventually I gave some talks myself (about science, inequality, fashions and religion). I have found that thinking about giving a talk helps me search for ideas and organize them when I find them. I do not think that I have reached any very clear conclusions, but I have had fun exploring.

Philosophy involves thinking about things more than is necessary. I like to amuse myself by thinking more than is necessary, but I would not call my thinking philosophy. Thinking for amusement is one reason for thinking. I think there are three other reasons for thinking, each representing a different level of effort. Only the lowest level of effort is necessary to decide what to believe. More effort is required to argue in favor of a belief. (This is not too difficult if the goal is to confound or confuse one's adversaries, but it is more difficult if one wants to convince them.) Most difficult is to do scholarly work, to advance knowledge. [Where does teaching fall in this classification? It is probably on the easy side of argument; it might be argument, it might be indoctrination.]

II Starting to think about religion again

Two things have made me think about religion in the last few years. One was the debate about evolution between Jim Fetzer and Walter Brown and a number of recent commentaries and letters in the Duluth News Tribune for and against evolution. The other was a book by David Sloan Wilson, "Darwin's Cathedral," which was an attempt to use religion as an illustration of group selection, Wilson's pet idea. In an earlier book, "Unto Others," Wilson and Elliott Sober used (group) selection ideas to make an argument about human altruism. [I think that there is something interesting here, particularly because of its political implications, but the subject is religion.]

When I finished David Sloan Wilson's book I wrote him and asked what else to read. Among his suggestions were Rodney Stark's, "The Rise of Christianity," and Elaine Pagel's, "The Origin of Satan." I read both of these two books and more, including more recent books by Stark, including, "One True God," "For the Glory of God," and "The Triumph of Reason." Rodney Stark is an excellent writer; his "Rise of Christianity" is worth reading for anyone interested in social or demographic explanations for the early success of Christianity. The second chapter of his "Glory of God" book, titled: "God's Handiwork: The Religious Origins of the Sciences," develops the thesis that modern science owes its origin to Christianity, and to its belief in a rational, all-powerful, law-giving God. Stark also rehearses some recent criticism of the thesis that there was, for a long time, a conflict between religion and science. His argument against this thesis is unfair and inaccurate. I am not sure how much of his argument is original with him, but the little that I have read suggests to me that the dismissal of the "conflict thesis" is based on pedantry, literal-mindedness and ad hominem arguments.

The importance of the study of religion

Religion is an important social phenomenon. Religions have many adherents. Religion is an important factor in the lives of many adherents, and religious practices affect many people who are not adherents to the same, or indeed, to any religion. Religions have been used to justify many wars in the past, and many current struggles, including the war in Iraq, are driven, at least in part, by religion motivations. In the United States the theory of evolution is under attack by people whose motivations are basically religious. The story of the conflict between religion and science is a long one. In general this conflict has consisted of religion attacking scientific beliefs, or believers, and then withdrawing when the scientific ideas gained overwhelming support. Scientists generally do not attack religion in their role as scientists, but they do sometimes dispute the theological ideas that are proposed as replacements for scientific ideas. This talk is not so much about how religion looks at science as about how science looks at religion. However, I will mention the history of the conflict between religion and science because that is one of the reasons that scientists are interested in religion. In the past, defenders of religion not only attacked science for its discoveries about the natural world, but they also attacked scholars who studied the origin of religions.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN RELIGION AND SCIENCE

Two important books were published in the late 1800s about the conflict between religion and science. The first, and best known at the time, was John William Draper's (1811-1882) "History of the Conflict between Religion and Science." Draper (1811-1882) was a British-born American chemist, who helped develop the Medical School at NYU and was its president for many years. He is known for his early work on photography. He took the first photograph of the moon and his photograph of his sister is the oldest surviving photographic portrait. He took photographs through a microscope and used them to illustrate his textbook on physiology, which was published in 1866. His chemistry textbook, published in 1846, was well known. Before publishing "Conflict," Draper published, "History of the Intellectual Development of Europe," in 1862, and the three volume "History of the American Civil War" from 1867-1870.

Andrew Dickson White (1832-1918), an American educator, historian and diplomat, published "A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom" in 1896. White was a co-founder and the first president of Cornell University, which he hoped would be dedicated to science and the pursuit of truth unhindered by the force of religion. The difficulties raised against his project by clergymen prompted him to deliver a lecture in 1869 titled: "The Battlefields of Science." White refined his arguments for thirty years before publishing "Warfare."

In preparation for this talk I read two old books, "Treatise on the Gods," by H. L. Mencken (1930) and "Religion and Science" by Bertrand Russell (1935), both of which mention A. D. White and accept the warfare thesis. Mencken writes (pp. 258-9):

"Dr. Andrew Dickson White, in "A History of the Warfare of Science With theology in Christendom," establishes beyond any doubt the unyielding hostility of all

Christian theologians, whether Catholic or Protestant, to every sort of true progress, and sets forth amusingly the technique of their retreat when defeated. So long as it seems safe they fight in the open, hitting valiantly on both sides of the belt, and trying to gain a quick victory by sheer ferocity. But once it becomes apparent that this quick victory is impossible, they begin to become more discreet. First they try to force some element of conformity into the heresy before them. Then they discover that it is not a heresy at all. And then they proceed to declare that they were never against it. The Copernican system went through all these stages, and the hypothesis of organic evolution is floating between the first and the second today. Many Protestant sects still reject it utterly, and, in such swamps of the intellect as the American Bible Belt, try to have it put down by the secular arm.”

Now it seems that historians of science contend that the “warfare thesis” [= conflict model = warfare thesis = Draper-White thesis] has been discredited by later, more accurate historical analysis. However, the conflict thesis still appeals to scientists, perhaps because they experience conflicts with religion in their work, even if the conflict thesis has been refuted to the satisfaction of historians. One of the reasons that I am interested in these books about religion and science is that the local paper often prints commentaries and letters about the relative merits of evolution and its current alternative, intelligent design, a three-hundred year old idea that fades away periodically, but never seems to die.

DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION

It is difficult to define religion because religions have many features and not all religions share the same features. Daniel Dennett (2006) is reluctant to define religion but he tentatively defines religions (p. 9) as “social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent whose approval is to be sought.” There are four aspects of this definition: (1) It refers to a group of people, not just individuals. (2) Adherents “avow” belief. (3) The avowal is directed to a supernatural agent. (4) Approval is sought. Belief in a supernatural agent (or avowal of belief) is not universal among religions, but it is true of the religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) which Dennett has in mind in his book. In his book, “The Sane Society,” Erich Fromm defined religion as a “system of orientation and an object of devotion.” Fromm’s definition included Communism. Bertrand Russell (1935) included Fascism and Communism as religions, but dropped Fascism after the war. In the Preface of his collection, “Why I am not a Christian,” Russell (1957) stated his belief: “I think that all the great religions of the world—Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Communism—both untrue and harmful.” (p. v) If religion is considered as a total system, then Fascism and Communism should be included as religions, but the supernatural component is the main focus of Dennett’s book, and it was one of the objects of criticism in Russell’s (1957) title essay. If one wants to know what Dennett is talking about (rather than agreeing on a definition of religion), then Dennett’s statement is fine.

Mencken (1930, pp. 110-1) writes:

“Four ideas lie at the bottom of all organized religion, whether ancient or modern, cultured or savage, to wit:
That the universe is controlled by powers of a potency superior to that of man, and that the fortunes of man are subject to their will.
That these powers take an interest in man, and may be influenced to favor him.
That certain men have a greater capacity for influencing them than the generality of men.
That certain words and acts are more pleasing to them, and hence more likely to make them friendly, than other words and acts.”

ATHEISTS AND NON-BELIEVERS BY ANY OTHER NAME

In his review of “Breaking the Spell,” Michael Ruse (2006) refers to Dennett as a “notorious atheist.” Dennett’s good friend, Richard Dawkins is sometimes referred to as a “militant atheist.” In an email to Dennett reprinted in anti-evolutionist William Dembski’s blog, Ruse, a noted historian and philosopher of evolution, complained that Dennett and Dawkins are not doing the cause (of evolution versus creationism and its newest incarnation, intelligent design) any good by assuming the pose of public atheists. Dennett’s position is certainly equivocal to say the least. He piles up insults against religion, comparing it to a parasite, a hallucination and a superstition, and then says that he hopes that fair-minded believers will read his book sympathetically. Ruse wants to write books that fair-minded believers would read and agree with. It seems to me that Ruse’s approach, that evolution is correct and should not alarm believers, is more likely to appeal to fair-minded believers than Dennett’s unintentionally provocative book. However, it also seems to me that despite their differences, Ruse and Dennett fall together between two more sensible approaches that non-believers might take in dealing with religion: the conservative approach of not talking to believers at all and the radical approach of abusing believers as fools and ignoramuses as, for example, Mencken (1930) did.

Dennett (2006) seems equivocal about what term to apply to his beliefs. He mentions the term “bright” for non-believers, and he compares this invented term with the term “gay,” which he imagines is analogous. The word atheist is a dysphemism, but there are plenty of euphemisms. Mencken (1930) used the term “Skeptic,” while Russell (1957) preferred “freethinker.” I think that “bright” is too cute. [I find myself using “believer” and “non-believer,” for no particular reason except to separate two kinds of thinking about religious ideas. I do not intend either term as euphemism or dysphemism.]

Atheism is not only a term of abuse, but it has sometimes been a crime. The Romans persecuted the early Christians as atheists because they did not believe in the Roman gods. A good definition of an atheist is someone who does not believe in the same gods as other people do. It has been said of Spinoza that he loved God so much that he was universally regarded as an atheist. Einstein is supposed to have said that he believed in the god of Spinoza. It would be good if we could distinguish believers and non-believers without seeming to praise or abuse either group.

DISTINGUISHING VARIOUS ASPECTS OF RELIGION

If one wants to study religion in a systematic way it would be good to distinguish among several aspects of religion. I would distinguish belief, religion and church. That is,

Beliefs of individuals, including the ideas that people believe, where the ideas come from and why they were accepted,

Religion as a system of beliefs, including creeds (for believers) and theology (for theologians), and

Churches as organizations of believers and their leaders, including ministers and theologians.

Another category, perhaps as important as any of the three above, involves the consequences of religion, including schools, hospitals and wars. Students of religion tend to study only one of these aspects, or perhaps part of one aspect. For example, Dennett (2006) concentrates on the beliefs of individuals and how their origin may be understood in terms of human nature. Stark (1996, 2001, 2003) concentrates on the consequences of religion. In his earlier work as a sociologist of religion, Stark concentrated on churches as organizations and on believers as members, or potential members, of churches. Armstrong (1994) is interested in the history of one idea (God) in the three Abrahamic religions.

Russell (1935, p. 8) says: "Each of the great historical religions has three aspects: (1) a Church, (2) a creed, and (3) a code of personal morals." For Russell these are more defining characteristics than separate objects of study. Russell points out that different religions at different times put different emphases on each of these aspects. Here I want to point out that religion has been studied by people from a number of different disciplines, and that different people, and different disciplines, focus on different aspects of religion.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION

The efforts of most people who study religious ideas is concerned with what they should believe. Religious leaders think about their beliefs and about what they want their followers to believe, and the followers want to know what they should believe. In some cases, perhaps in many cases, both leaders and followers will fall back to a concern for what the followers should profess that they believe. I think that there are two distinctions here: (1) between the clergy and the laity, that is, between those who decide what others are to believe, and the others, and (2) between beliefs and professions of belief. I will not pursue these distinctions here, but I will talk about Dennett's concept of a "belief in belief," which is not the same as, but is related to the second distinction. This talk is about the science of religion, but before I get to that I would like to mention several ways that people have studied religion from outside religion.

The scholarly study of religion outside of science

Intellectual history

In his “History of the conflict between religion and Science,” John William Draper (1874) discusses the early history of Christianity and of science. Ideas have histories, and history is affected by ideas. The success of ideas cannot be understood solely in terms of the intrinsic merits of the ideas. The ideas that became part of Christianity had a history. For example, Christianity got the idea of monotheism from Judaism, who got it from heaven knows where. Christianity modified the Jewish idea of God, using ideas from Greek philosophy. Christianity competed with polytheistic rivals with some success, but its greatest success came after it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. However, a cost of this political success was that Christianity embraced the local gods of many pagan religions. Draper traces the history of some conflicting ideas, describing various heresies and the way that the early Church dealt with them. One such heresy was Nestorism, which was driven from the Mediterranean world, but survived in Arabia, where it won a convert named Mohammed, whose followers conquered much of the land around the Mediterranean. It was the Islamic world that preserved and extended modern learning and provided the basis for the intellectual development of Europe in the Renaissance.

I don’t know how much of what Draper says is true. I may not even understand what he tried to say. However, I do think that would be useful to understand the interplay between ideas and other historical forces if one wants to understand the history of religion. In his “For the Glory of God,” Rodney Stark (2003, 154-155) argues that Islam failed to develop modern science because of its views about the nature of God. He says that the God of Islam was active, rather than the author of fixed natural law. I think that there are two other classes of explanation of the fact that modern theoretical science arose in western Europe rather than anywhere else. One explanation appeals to political and economic forces, the other to chance. When something happens it has to happen somewhere first. And if it happens slowly and is rapidly communicated, it will happen one place and then spread around the world. It is possible that the fact that something happens one place rather than another needs no explanation other than chance.

Biblical criticism

In his book, “Treatise on the Gods,” H. L. Mencken (1930) argued forcefully against religion, which he viewed as an enemy of personal and intellectual freedom. Mencken was a fierce polemicist, but he was also very well-read and a lover of literature and a promoter of talented writers. Mencken regarded “Treatise on the Gods,” as his best book, but critics rated his philological work in “The American Language” higher. Mencken based some of his argument on work on Biblical criticism which had been summarized in a multi-authored collection that was published a few years before his religion book. Mencken is fun to read because he is clear and forceful. Mencken loves literature and thinks that the Bible is the greatest book in the world, but he thinks that many believers are boobs. He refers to those who share his views as “skeptics,” while Daniel Dennett is

torn between the rather cute term, “brights,” and “atheists.” Mencken is clear in his beliefs and does not try to appeal to those who disagree with him. He thinks that they are stupid and says so. Dennett would like to win over those who disagree with him, but I do not think that he is likely to convince them.

THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

Various social sciences

(1) Anthropology

Religion has long been an important subject of study for anthropologists. Two issues are (1) the variety of religions, and (2) the nature of primitive religions, which may be used to shed light on the history of religion. It is interesting that when Rodney Stark compares the religiousness of practitioners of various natural and social sciences, he points out that people in the “hardest” sciences are the most likely to be believers, while those in the “softest” sciences are the least likely to be believers. One might counter that those whose work is most relevant to understanding religion are the least likely to be believers, while those whose work has nothing to do with religion are the more likely to believe in religious ideas. Anyone who is interested in the variety of religion should pay attention to anthropological work.

(2) Sociology

Most of my thinking about religion is based on the work of Rodney Stark, who is a sociologist of religion. He has studied churches as institutions, and also the conditions that make it likely that an individual will be recruited to a religion. He used demographic ideas to help explain the success of Christianity in its early years. In the books that I have read, Stark uses his sociological approach to study the history of religion (Judaism and Christianity) and its consequences. Stark was one of a group of people who began studying the sociology of religion under the supervision and inspiration of Charles Glock, a sociologist of religion at Berkeley who started the Survey Research Center there. Stark is a clear, forceful writer who is not afraid to attack the conventional wisdom. He does seem, however, to have a sort of defensiveness which I associate with people who are worried about whether their discipline is really scientific. He leans quite heavily on a limited number of facts which might not actually be sufficient to bear the weight of his conclusions. (For example, his argument that Christianity grew at a very high exponential rate for a time in its early history is interesting, and I would say, plausible, but the limited data that his conclusion is based on is only suggestive rather than conclusive.) Stark welcomes ideas from other disciplines, particularly economics—including the concept of a market for religion, or the interpretation of religious adherence in terms of rational choice theory.

A wikipedia article about the sociology of religion lists four sociologists: Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Rodney Stark.

(3) Economics

Adam Smith used religion as an example to which he applied his methods in "The Wealth of Nations" in 1776. The story is told nicely in Jerry Muller's (1995) wonderfully readable book, which provides references to some of the few recent papers on the economics of religion. Laurence Iannaccone is an economist interested in the economics of religion. His 1991 paper discusses the "market" for religion. The suggestion is that the unusually (compared with other Western countries) large number of believers in the United States may be explained by the religious freedom that guarantees an open market for religion, which contrasts with European countries with state religions that do not have to compete for members in order to be supported. Adam Smith discussed the dynamics of religions in terms of their adherents. A religion that has relatively wealthy members, as did the Church of England in his time, might adjust itself to serve the needs of its members and not make demands that they would not be willing to satisfy. However, poorer people want a religion that satisfies their needs, perhaps being more demanding of their time and resources, but which supplies their particular needs, including exhortation to behave in ways appropriate to them (do not gamble or drink) which are not necessary for the richer members of the older, established church.

(4) Psychology

Another approach to religion is to ask why individuals have the beliefs they do, including why individuals should invent or accept the beliefs they have, and how the set of beliefs that constitute a religion were invented or discovered in the first place. This is the approach used by Daniel Dennett in his book, "Breaking the Spell," which I intend to discuss. The underlying issues are old, tracing back hundreds of years, at least to David Hume's, "The Natural History of Religion," and even earlier for the general question of mind. During the 1960s, Dennett was a student of Gilbert Ryle, the Oxford philosopher of mind. Much recent work has been done by neurophysiologists on the relationship between the brain and the mind. Much is now known that was unknown in the 1960s, or in the 1750s. It is not clear how many new ideas there are about mind and brain, but many facts are available that bear on the question of which ideas are correct. In fact, I think that it is an important fact about thought, that people may think to a certain point and stop because it is too difficult to go further, but when some else thinks to that point, or evidence become apparent that compels one to that point, it is easy to think further. It is not a new idea that the mind is what the brain does, but if this is revealed as a scientific fact, then it is easy to go further, to think about how the brain affects thought, and to regard thinking as part of science.

Psychology of Religion is APA Division 36. Among the workers listed in a wikipedia article on the psychology of religion are William James, Sigmund Freud and Freud's disciples, Jung and Adler.

DANIEL DENNETT

Daniel Dennett is a prolific, well-known philosopher of mind. He was born in Boston,

the son of an historian of the same name. He spent some early years in Beirut, where his father, an Islamic scholar, was an operative in the OSS. Daniel Dennett senior was killed on a mission to Ethiopia in 1948. Young Dennett grew up in the United States. He attended Philips Exeter Academy and Harvard. During his freshman year he read about Descartes' idea about mind and was intrigued. Dennett graduated in 1963 and went to Oxford, where he studied with Gilbert Ryle. Dennett received his D. Phil. in 1965 at the age of 23. He has pursued his interest in the mind ever since. Dennett has written quite a number of books, including "Consciousness Explained," and "Darwin's Dangerous Idea." He is known for his attempts to apply ideas from evolution, particularly Richard Dawkins' idea of "memes," to the study of mind.

DANIEL DENNETT'S SCIENCE OF RELIGION

Early in his book, "Breaking the Spell," Daniel Dennett (2006) asserts that religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about (pp. 14-15). The main question is: "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 live so strongly [p. 27]?" Dennett's title, "Breaking the Spell," refers to his hope that two sorts of spells will be broken, one is a taboo about against a "forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion [p. 17]," the other is the spell cast by religion itself. Dennett uses the Hans Christian Andersen's story, "The Emperor's New Clothes," to illustrate the relationship between these two spells. This illustration does not seem very accurate. Certainly it is unkind.

Dennett's book is quite wide-ranging and discursive. He mentions and comments on many ideas about religion, but he concentrates on the religious ideas that individuals have, what might be called a psychological approach. I will concentrate on a few ideas: memes, intentional objects and the intentional stance, and belief in belief.

Memes

The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) in "The Selfish Gene" to stand for a mental analogue of the physical object, the gene. Dennett discusses memes in Appendix A, "The New Replicators," reprinted from "The Encyclopedia of Evolution." The OED defines memes as: "An element of culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means." Richard Dawkins said that "a meme should be regarded as a unit of information residing in the brain." Dawkins used bird song as an example (and nest building). Dennett says that there are three defining characteristics of memes:

Replication

Variation (mutation)

Differential fitness (competition)

Darwin [sic] used words as examples of culturally inherited entities. Dennett asks people who do not believe that memes exist: do you believe that words exist? Classic examples of memes are songs, poems and recipes.

Intentional objects, intentional systems and the intentional stance

It is not very clear to me what is meant by various phrases involving the adjective, “intentional.” The original use in modern philosophy was Franz Brentano’s term: “intentionality,” in which thought refers to an object. This must be distinguished from the use of “intentionality” in folk psychology, which refers to agents as intentional systems. This is closer to Dennett’s use than Brentano’s meaning. Dennett referred to intentional systems as entities “whose behaviour can be predicted by the method of attributing belief, desires and rational acumen.” Dennett distinguished several grades of intentional systems. First-order systems have beliefs and desires, but not beliefs and desires about beliefs and desires. Second-order systems have beliefs and desires about beliefs and desires. Once one goes to second-order systems it is not difficult to go to higher order systems, but eventually one can become confused about which level one is at.

Dennett (1971) contrasted what he called the “intentional stance” from the “physical stance” and the “design stance.” His example was a chess-playing computer. If one wants to understand the computer (perhaps in order to play against it), one could think of the computer as a physical object [which might be misleading because there are so many different kinds of machines that could run the same program], or one could think about the design of the machine—what the builder of the machine and the programmer were trying to do—or one could think about what the machine is trying to do and how it will go about it. More homely examples are using Newton’s laws to explain of the motion of a projectile (the physical stance), or expecting a car to start when the key is turned (the design stance). If the object of interest is another person, it is reasonable to assume the intentional stance, which assumes, among other things, that the intentional object is a rational agent.

It seems to me that one might characterize behaviorist psychology as assuming the physical stance to understanding animal behavior. I think that some version of the intentional stance might be preferable, but one might not want to assume that the animal is rational in the same way that a human is. Some animals are probably best understood as being goal-oriented, but it would be a mistake to assume that they have the same sort of goals as humans have.

In “Breaking the Spell,” Dennett also talks about “intentional objects,” which are very different from intentional systems. He refers (p. 211) to intentional objects as the “things that somebody can think about.” That is, intentional objects are objects of our beliefs, not necessarily objects with beliefs. A colorful example Dennett supplies is of a BBC broadcast in which nursery school students were asked to describe Queen Elizabeth II. They envisioned her wearing her crown while she vacuumed the palace or sitting on her throne while she watched television. The point is that people have an idea, sometimes quite a wrong idea, about the objects of their thought. Dennett makes some nice distinctions between fact and fiction and about getting ideas right or wrong about fact and fiction. Dennett mentions historical works, including Karen Armstrong’s “The History of

God, and points out that the authors take a neutral position on God. Dennett distinguishes between two kinds of neutrality; which idea is better and whether any idea is correct. [This is my way of describing the distinction. Dennett offers a colorful example, but I think it obscures the distinction.]

In all, it seems that there are three different ideas here, “intentional objects,” “intentional systems,” and the “intentional stance.” Each idea is interesting in itself, but using the same adjective is a bit confusing. If I had read Dennett’s (1987) book, “The Intentional Stance,” I might not have been confused when I read “Breaking the Spell.”

EXAMPLES

The domestication of religion

In one of the most interesting sections in his book, Dennett discusses what he calls “the domestication of religion.” There are several ideas in this section.

Folk religions changed to organized religions as societies grew larger. Guilds of priests and shamans became firms (with franchises and brand names).

Following Jared Diamond, Dennett mentions the idea that human beings discovered nearly all the useful plants and domesticable animals. Dennett writes (p. 169): “How clever of wild sheep to have acquired that most versatile adaptation, the shepherd! By forming a symbiotic alliance with *Homo sapiens*, sheep could *outsource* their chief survival tasks.” Domestic animals no longer had to worry about enemies of finding their own food and they could do with smaller brains than wild animals.

Diamond pointed out that societies developed from clans through tribes to large states, which he terms kleptocracies. One of the functions of religion is to justify kleptocracy.

The stewards of religion domesticated ideas in Diamond’s sense of finding all the Good Ideas. One of the good ideas was of God as a higher power, which Dennett compares to a car salesman or a Mafia member who appeals to someone higher who is really telling him what he already wants to do. Another Good Idea is the praise that the stewards bestow on the leaders. Not only does this placate the civil power, but it also permits the stewards a kind of control.

I would like to suggest a conclusion that Dennett does not reach. As animals become domesticated, he says, they can get by with smaller brains. Maybe when religions become domesticated, they also can get by with smaller brains. Perhaps this is one explanation for the fading popularity of religion in Western Europe, where state religions do not face the dangers of surviving in the natural (competitive) world.

Belief in belief

When folk religion changes to organized religion, there were some changes in the

nature of belief. In folk religion it was necessary to rely on individual belief [and perhaps to have a plausible idea of real gods]. But with organized religion, it is more important that members *avow* belief. Members may no longer actually believe what they are supposed to, but they may still believe that they *should* believe. That is, they no longer believe, but they believe in belief. Gods no longer need to be plausible, but there is a creed which consists of statements to which a member must agree.

Dennett points out that it is very difficult to determine exactly what people believe. One suggestion is to compare the results of two kinds of questions:

“I believe in God” Yes _____ No _____ I don’t know _____

“God exists” Yes _____ No _____ I don’t know _____

Social sciences versus “hard science”

Near the end of Appendix B Dennett claims that the social science differ from the “hard sciences” because they deal with how people should live (p. 374). I do not think that this is true, but I think that Rodney Stark (2003, data in Table 2.2, p. 194) is also wrong when he uses the same terminology (social science versus “hard” sciences) in his ad hominem argument that real scientists believe in religion. Stark reports data which show that mathematicians and statisticians are more likely to consider themselves “religious persons” than those who are in the physical or life sciences, who, in turn, are more likely to consider themselves as “religious persons” than social scientists. The least religious are psychologists and anthropologists. Stark uses scientific status to suggest that real scientists are more religious. I would suggest that the data show that those people who know more about religion are less likely to be religious.

RECOMMENDED READING

Dennett’s book should be read by anyone with a serious interest in what evolutionary theory and cognitive psychology has to say about religious belief. Dawkins’ (1991) essay, “Viruses of the Mind,” is an excellent, brief presentation of one or two of the basic ideas in Dennett’s book. The New Yorker review (Orr 2006) of Dennett’s book is the best summary that I have seen. Iannaccone’s (1991) and Muller’s (1995) chapter 12 are both brief, interesting discussions of the economics of religion. Jesse Bering is a young cognitive psychologist who describes his work and its implications in his 2006 article in the American Scientist. Paul Bloom (2005) describes some relevant work from developmental psychology. To a large extent Dennett summarizes ideas relevant to religious belief from a wide variety of sources. He does not reach any definitive conclusion. Once one accepts Dennett’s premise that religious belief will yield to scientific study much of what has to say follows from the facts that he describes. I think that Dennett’s book is a good guide to the literature that his thinking is based on. His book is about the psychology of belief. It is not about systems of belief, that is, religion, or about churches, church membership, or about the consequences of belief or church membership.

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