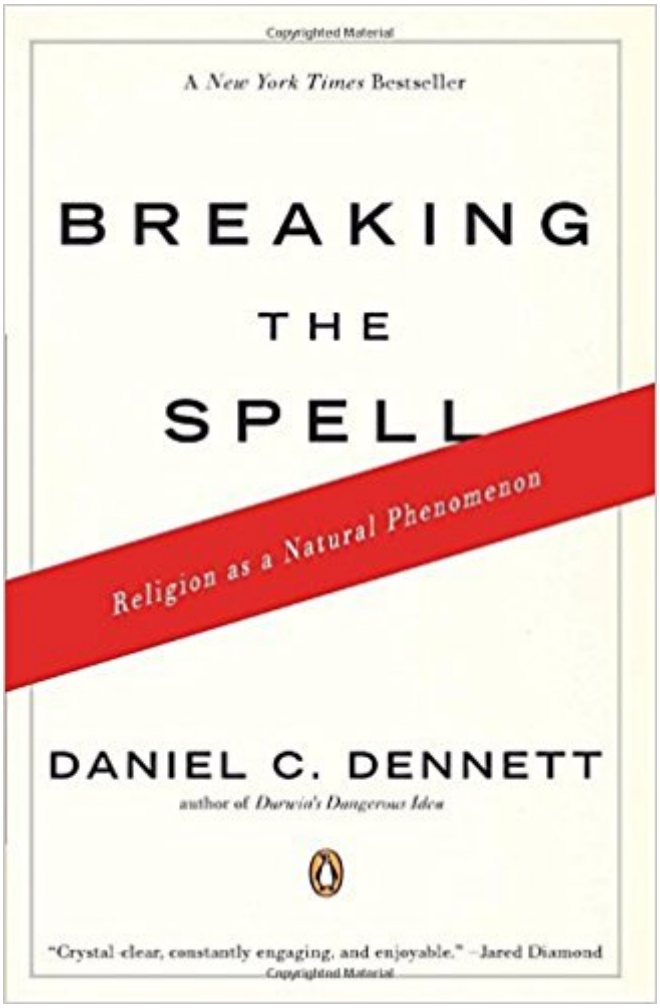
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Breaking The Spell: Religion As A Natural Phenomenon



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Synopsis

The New York Times bestseller Ã¢â ¬â œ a Ã¢â ¬Å“crystal-clear, constantly engagingÃ¢â ¬Â• (Jared Diamond) exploration of the role that religious belief plays in our lives and our interactionsFor all the thousands of books that have been written about religion, few until this one have attempted to examine it scientifically: to ask whyÃ¢â ¬â •and howÃ¢â ¬â •it has shaped so many lives so strongly. Is religion a product of blind evolutionary instinct or rational choice? Is it truly the best way to live a moral life? Ranging through biology, history, and psychology, Daniel C. Dennett charts religionÃ¢â ¬â„¢s evolution from Ã¢â ¬Å“wildÃ¢â ¬Â• folk belief to Ã¢â ¬Å“domesticatedÃ¢â ¬Â• dogma. Not an antireligious screed but an unblinking look beneath the veil of orthodoxy, Breaking the Spell will be read and debated by believers and skeptics alike.

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Customer Reviews

In his characteristically provocative fashion, Dennett, author of Darwin's Dangerous Idea and director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, calls for a scientific, rational examination of religion that will lead us to understand what purpose religion serves in our culture. Much like E.O. Wilson (In Search of Nature), Robert Wright (The Moral Animal), and Richard Dawkins (The Selfish Gene), Dennett explores religion as a cultural phenomenon governed by the processes of evolution and natural selection. Religion survives because it has some kind of beneficial role in human life, yet Dennett argues that it has also played a maleficent role. He elegantly pleads for religions to engage in empirical self-examination to protect future generations

from the ignorance so often fostered by religion hiding behind doctrinal smoke screens. Because Dennett offers a tentative proposal for exploring religion as a natural phenomenon, his book is sometimes plagued by generalizations that leave us wanting more ("Only when we can frame a comprehensive view of the many aspects of religion can we formulate defensible policies for how to respond to religions in the future"). Although much of the ground he covers has already been well trod, he clearly throws down a gauntlet to religion. (Feb. 6) Copyright Ã Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

If nowhere else, the dead live on in our brain cells, not just as memories but as programs— computerlike models compiled over the years capturing how the dearly departed behaved when they were alive. These simulations can be remarkably faithful. In even the craziest dreams the people we know may remain eerily in character, acting as we would expect them to in the real world. Even after the simulation outlasts the simulated, we continue to sense the strong presence of a living being. Sitting beside a gravestone, we might speak and think for a moment that we hear a reply. In the 21st century, cybernetic metaphors provide a rational grip on what prehistoric people had every reason to think of as ghosts, voices of the dead. And that may have been the beginning of religion. If the deceased was a father or a village elder, it would have been natural to ask for advice—which way to go to find water or the best trails for a hunt. If the answers were not forthcoming, the guiding spirits could be summoned by a shaman. Drop a bundle of sticks onto the ground or heat a clay pot until it cracks: the patterns form a map, a communication from the other side. These random walks the gods prescribed may indeed have formed a sensible strategy. The shamans would gain in stature, the rituals would become liturgies, and centuries later people would fill mosques, cathedrals and synagogues, not really knowing how they got there. With speculations like these, scientists try to understand what for most of the world’s population needs no explanation: why there is this powerful force called religion. It is possible, of course, that the world’s faiths are triangulating in on the one true God. But if you forgo that leap, other possibilities arise: Does banding together in groups and acting out certain behaviors confer a reproductive advantage, spreading genes favorable to belief? Or are the seeds of religion more likely to be found among the memes—ideas so powerful that they leap from mind to mind? In Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon, Daniel Dennett, director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, has embarked on another of his seemingly impossible quests. His provocatively titled book Consciousness Explained made a persuasive effort to do just that.

More recently, in Freedom Evolves, he took on free will from a Darwinian perspective. This time he may have assumed the hardest task of all—and not just because of the subject matter. Dennett hopes that this book will be read not just by atheists and agnostics but by the religiously faithful—and that they will come to see the wisdom of analyzing their deepest beliefs scientifically, weeding out the harmful from the good. The spell he hopes to break, he suggests, is not religious belief itself but the conviction that its details are off-limits to scientific inquiry, taboo. "I appreciate that many readers will be profoundly distrustful of the tack I am taking here," he writes. "They will see me as just another liberal professor trying to cajole them out of some of their convictions, and they are dead right about that—that’s what I am, and that’s exactly what I am trying to do." This warning comes at the end of a long, two-chapter overture in which Dennett defends the idea that religion is a fit subject for scrutiny. The question is how many of the faithful will follow him that far. For those who do not need to be persuaded, the main draw here is a sharp synthesis of a library of evolutionary, anthropological and psychological research on the origin and spread of religion. Drawing on thinkers such as Pascal Boyer (whose own book is called Religion Explained) and giving their work his own spin, Dennett speculates how a primitive belief in ghosts might have given rise to wind spirits and rain gods, wood nymphs and leprechauns. The world is a scary place. What else to blame for the unexpected than humanlike beings lurking behind the scenes? The result would be a cacophony of superstitions— memes vying with memes—some more likely to proliferate than others. In a world where agriculture was drawing people to aggregate in larger and larger settlements, it would be beneficial to believe you had been commanded by a stern god to honor and protect your neighbors, those who share your beliefs instead of your DNA. Casting this god as a father figure also seems like a natural. Parents have a genetic stake in giving their children advice that improves their odds for survival. You’d have less reason to put your trust in a Flying Spaghetti Monster. At first this winnowing of ghost stories would be unconscious, but as language and self-awareness developed, some ideas would be groomed and domesticated. Folk religion would develop into organized religion, Dennett suggests, somewhat the way folk music bloomed into the music of today. The metaphor is hard to resist. "Every minister in every faith is like a jazz musician," he writes, "keeping traditions alive by playing the beloved standards the way they are supposed to be played, but also incessantly gauging and deciding, slowing the pace or speeding up, deleting or adding another phrase to a prayer, mixing familiarity and novelty in just the right proportions to grab the minds and hearts of the listeners in attendance." Like biological parasites, memes are not necessarily dependent on the welfare of their hosts. One of the most powerful fixations, and one that may have Dennett flummoxed, is that it is

sacrilegious to question your own beliefs and an insult for anyone else to try. "What a fine protective screen this virus provides," he observes, "permitting it to shed the antibodies of skepticism effortlessly!" Asides like this seem aimed more at fellow skeptics than at the true believers Dennett hopes to unconvert. A better tack might be for him to start his own religion. Meanwhile his usual readers can deepen their understanding with another of his penetrating books. George Johnson, a 2005 Templeton-Cambridge Journalism Fellow in Science and Religion, is author of Fire in the Mind: Science, Faith, and the Search for Order and six other books. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Dennett takes us on what amounts to a sort of rough draft, or outline of his hypothesis on how traditional folk religions first developed and then 'culturally evolved' into the sophisticated religions that are popular amongst humanity today. This book will be of great interest to all thinking people, religious or otherwise, who like to think about how our world works. Dennett is up front about the limitations of his ideas and asks as many questions as he does make statements about the matter at hand. The book wraps up with Dennett discussing how we might go about answering some of the questions he puts forward through out. It's in no way a 'religion bash' like Dawkins et al might write and in fact probably the most thought provoking writing on the subject of religion I've come across.

Dennett is a very good philosopher and writer. He raises many questions about what religion is and why it should be studied scientifically. He leads the reader through paths presenting questions and their possible answers from all sides. He doesn't take sides but does show why some answers are incorrect or need further examination as they have too long been accepted blindly on faith against all evidence to the contrary. The readers that stay with him will gain a great understanding of religion and the philosophical and scientific perspective.

Along withÃ Â Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former MissionaryÃ Â andThe Book Your Church Doesn't Want You to ReadBreaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon by Daniel C.Dennett are the top three books that I feel every skeptic/new atheist needs to have in their personal library.I read my library's copy of this book,but I just ordered my own copy as I know that I will want to re-read these books,as much as I used to study my Bible!They are a joy to read,since they make so much sense and are not full of contradictions like the Bible is.Breaking the spell did an awesome job of showing the similarities of religion to mythology and superstition,in easy to understand language,and that is where I found the greatest enlightenment and value.Very highly

recommended!

I believe it would take at least two readings of Dennett for most to fully grasp his input into the ubiquitous religious phenomenon/a. I plan to move on, but wish to relay my impressions.As Dennett would agree, some people who claim to be religious are either non-participants, religiously shallow (sideliners), fanatical, or merely sponges that passively soak up (believe) what they are told is the "truth." Others are intelligent (non-religiously, at least), dedicated followers of the "truth" as they have been told it.Yes, as Dennett proposes, if religion is important it should prove itself and not hide behind the you-must-have-faith cloak, which is sort of like the pusher (of whatever) saying, "Trust me."The author is persuasive (gentle AND firm) in his technique at opening up the minds of spiritually-oriented people (regardless of their religious bent), fence-sitters (known as agnostics) and the quite-satisfied atheists. I feel sure, as he admits, some religious types will bristle at his audacity to question and lay bare religion/s, tentatively or absolutely--such readers will close the book, he expects. But not being willing to hear the other person out is too cowardly, too defensive, too insular. Even if one thinks Dennett has gotten it wrong, one should wrestle with his contentions--as some previous reviewers have.This reading was both an uncomfortable insight or intrusion into my beliefs about the subject of religion and any god. Regardless of my present (if any) religious state of mind, the tentacles of a god-worshipping mind-set were tenuously present. Was this book going to suffocate me: Snuff out the life I knew, but had begun to question, to reject--yet felt guilty about believing and, also, not believing? The author forced me to face the future as reason sees it--believing this is it, there isn't any more. This is something I didn't want to think about, but WHY NOT examine a belief system I was simply born into?To be redundant, I knew from the beginning that this would be a hard but necessary read. Hard, because it would make me face life-long assumptions, and the fear of losing a "what if" hard-wired (socialized/brainwashed) into my being. And necessary, because it would urge me to think about what is reality, that is, spiritual reality as to whether, indeed, it is "the real thing."There is a lot of "meat" in this book, but I want to share just a few quotes that made me ponder:Page 53: "[Readers] will see me...as trying to cajole them out of some of their convictions, and they are dead right about that."Page 134: "Some crutches of the soul work only if you believe they do"--quoting someone else.Page 208: "Most people don't feel the need to examine the details of the religious propositions they profess."Page 303: Dennett defines spirituality as "letting your SELF go." Would some think this definition borders on "good" hedonism? (I wonder how he would separate them.)Page 309: "In a nutshell...religion evolved [is man-made--yes, man made god], but it doesn't have to be good for us in order to evolve. Tobacco

[use] evolved [too]."

A great scholarly work.Dennett is one of the most tolerant atheists I have read. He does not treat religious people in a condescending manner, which was refreshing.His goal is to scientifically determine what the origins and effects of religion are. Along the way though, he raises important questions about the utility of religion and its use of ambiguity as an element of fitness.Thoroughly fascinating book.

The most concise, clear, and undeniable (if you allow yourself to read it) thesis on just how we became enamored with folk, traditional, and finally organized religion, I've ever read. I believe it allows "the faithful" something they maybe haven't had before: A way out that is blameless, honorable, and above all without shame. It explains step-by-step the human propensity to want something that some of us know, if not outwardly, then very, very deeply just isn't there. This book will hold a high place on my altar to atheism. I encourage open-minded believers, and non-believers to read it. Believers will come away KNOWING something more about themselves, not just a blind, unquestioning faith. Non-believers will see further vindication, and maybe encourage fence-sitting agnostics to join the drumbeat.

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