



The God Meme

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Imagine a tone-deaf music scholar, who against the tide bravely insists that music is really all about the patterns formed by the written notes on the page. He calls himself an “acute.” He is proud of his open-mindedness; he has actually talked to people who claim they enjoy *listening* to music. They are not a bad lot on the whole, but what he hears from them only confirms his beliefs. For even the so-called experts disagree radically in their judgments of what they hear, and most of those who just plain enjoy music seem inarticulate about why they like what they do, and ignorant about how music actually works. As bad, when people “make music,” they do it for a bewildering variety of motives, some good, some not. So it is hardly surprising that often very popular “musicians” have unsavory personal habits. All in all, the scholar is only reinforced in his theory that anything about music that the written

notes cannot explain is not worth explaining. Far from being a disability, our acute’s tone-deafness is the tool that allows him to rend the curtains of musical mystification.

This acute scholar has a great deal in common with Daniel Dennett, philosophy professor at Tufts University, National Book Award and Pulitzer

Prize finalist, and self-proclaimed “bright”—that is, nonbeliever. While he admits he is no expert on the particular

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of religious doctrine, he has interviewed believers and sees that religion can play a very positive role in their lives. But the real story of religion is the spread of a corrosive illusion—inspiring acts of interdenominational brutality, or standing in the way of scientific progress, or dulling individuals to the truths of existence. Even acknowledging the good that religion does for some people—as a source of comfort in mourning or character-building for the weak-willed—it is perfectly

possible that “something we could devise might do as well or better.” Dennett has also noticed that believers disagree about what their faith demands, and can be pretty murky on its particulars. Combine this shocking situation with the obvious dangers crusading religion seems to be playing in the twenty-first century—Christian fundamentalism at home, radical Islam abroad—and you can understand why Dennett believes it is time to “break the spell.” The bright man’s alternative to piety is a scientific account of the origins and workings of religion, one that allows us to see religion for what it is and then move beyond it.

Dennett believes—or wants us to believe—that by proposing the scientific study of religion he is bravely breaking a taboo. But it seems unlikely that Dennett has much to fear from his colleagues at the university club, and even he must repeatedly qualify his claim to the title of taboo-breaker. No doubt many pious believers are unwilling or uninterested in seeing their most fundamental beliefs closely scrutinized. At times, Dennett claims to be writing to such believers, trying to get them to open up to such examination. But the more a potential religious reader is likely to be upset by Dennett’s book, the less likely he would be to pick it up in the first place.

And of course, Dennett is perfectly aware that we have “been looking carefully at religion for a long time.”

Some of that study might even be useful, despite the fact that there have been “few good researchers, in any discipline” who have taken up the topic. These “second-rate colleagues” have done second-rate work because the objective study of religion has largely been the province of social science, which is not at all the sort of science Dennett believes is worthwhile. Rather, what we need is an inquiry into religion informed by Darwin, a study based in the “testable hypotheses of evolutionary psychology.”

As Dennett presents it, evolutionary psychology starts from the insight that the brain evolves interactively with the external environment to have capacities which, in human beings, produce certain patterns of thought. Some of these capacities and patterns prove competitively advantageous, others do not. Religion, as Dennett defines it—“social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought”—represents a pattern of thought that is evidently extremely powerful, given how omnipresent it seems to be in human history. Dennett thinks that theories of evolutionary psychology are beginning to get a handle on why that might be true—that is, understanding the benefits and costs of the religious way of thinking, and how it fits into distinctive human mental structures.

For example, Dennett makes the interesting suggestion that man's ability to adopt a deeply layered "intentional attitude" (i.e., I think that he thinks that I think, etc.) in our relations with other humans may spill over into our dealings with the natural world, leading to various forms of animism. Other suggestions seem less promising, such as the trite notion that threats of hell-fire, because of their "deep psychological impact," are a powerful means to enforce the profession of beliefs that are otherwise incomprehensible. Maybe for some. Lincoln could joke about the shovel thief who, when threatened with damnation as he was caught in the act, quipped that with credit extended for that long, he'd take two.

A crude evolutionary argument might conclude from the widespread persistence of religious belief that it conveys a competitive advantage. Dennett's use of the "meme" concept allows him to cast doubt on any such conclusion. Just as genes are the basic units that transmit our biological traits, memes are the basic units of our culture—ideas and concepts. Memes are replicators driven by the same evolutionary logic that drives biological replication: the differential success at reproduction caused by variations that prove adaptive, or not, under competitive circumstances. That joke that you hear and forget is a meme that cannot compete successfully with others for your atten-

tion. The one you just have to pass on to friends is a successful meme; it sticks in your head and it replicates when you tell it to others—although probably not exactly the same way it was told to you. At some point, that difference may make it less funny or more. The memes of 11th-grade American history may not stick in the 11th-grade head as well as the latest pop song, but they get themselves published and republished in books that will remain required reading long after that pop song—successful enough on its own terms—resides in a forgotten MP3 file.

Meme theory is pretty heady stuff, and Dennett uses it to maximum advantage, even though by doing so he puts himself in conflict with the evolutionary psychologists on whom he otherwise relies. Dennett believes that memes are "selfish"; *their* success at replication does not mean that the *tools* they use to replicate themselves—us, individually or collectively—benefit. Their relationships with hosts may be mutually beneficial, or neutral, or parasitic. Even though he calls for more research, Dennett is pretty sure that the religion meme is parasitic. How else to explain the persistence of religious teachings so manifestly at odds with what modern science tells us about the world? How else to explain the propensity of religion to become fanaticism? How else to explain that the United States, a country with such impeccable Enlightenment cre-

dentials, should continue to exhibit such a powerful place for religious belief? Religion is stuck in our heads like a bad commercial jingle; it is a dangerous spell that needs to be broken by science.

If religion is a bad meme, the way to get rid of it, or to get rid of its most dangerous forms, is to focus on *transmission*. (Because he wants innocent believers to be held morally responsible for the dangerous actions of religious fanatics, the distinction between faith and fanaticism is consistently obscured in the book.) Dennett says he is against “crude and cruel” programs of religious hygiene such as were attempted in the Soviet Union; they don’t work, and (worse?) they often lead to a religious rebound. But it is clear he is interested in sophisticated and gentle efforts towards “inoculation and isolation,” to which end he presents a variety of policy recommendations for consideration.

First and foremost, we need more research into the evolution of religion. His own book is made up mostly of “possible stories”—educated guesses about the evolutionary origins of religion—but he wants scientists to develop more testable hypotheses and the research to test them. Believers who are not willing to subject their beliefs to the strict canons of scientific rationality are to be excluded from the discussion. “We” simply have no obligation to

take what they have to say seriously, except as data. At times, “we” means the elite academic community; at other times, it means modern democracy as a whole. His idea of a national conversation would apparently exclude the likes of Thomas Jefferson, who though perhaps himself a “bright,” still trembled for his nation when he remembered that God is just. If Jefferson really meant that a Divine creator has providential oversight over the affairs of man, he can’t be part of the discussion.

A second policy recommendation is that teaching the truth about religion—the truth as discovered and proven by modern science—should be mandatory in all schools, whether public or private. As Dennett puts it, “We teach them about *all* the world’s religions, in a matter-of-fact, historically and biologically informed way.” Depending on the teacher and the curriculum, one can imagine this effort as a live- or a dead-virus inoculation, but inoculation it obviously is. “No religion should be favored, and none ignored.” The more one takes this inclusiveness seriously, the more absurd the sheer scale of the project becomes—unless the very idea of the thing is, in Woodrow Wilson’s words, to chill by overexposure. The point, in other words, is not to understand the world’s varied, rich, and complex religious traditions, but to understand the absurdity of religion in the abstract by drowning students in a superficial sampling of its particulars.

The required teaching of religion in schools goes along with a third suggestion: that parental teaching of religion be closely monitored and treated as a potential form of child abuse. Parents, he suggests, should be prohibited from teaching anything “likely to close the minds” of children “through fear and hatred” or “by disabling them from inquiry”—precisely what Dennett believes much religion routinely does. “It’s just an idea,” he says coyly. If you throw enough memes out there, maybe some of them will stick. Rather than offering a new science of religion, Dennett seems most interested in floating any strategy that will weaken or destroy the influence of religion. Perhaps such Machiavellian rhetoric and policies are what the victory of science requires, but this is, in itself, hardly science at all.

In a section exposing the “Toxic Memes” of religion, Dennett trots out the problem of dual loyalties: religious believers who use “the security of a free society” to advance their own agendas. “There are some among them who are working hard to ‘hasten the inevitable,’ not merely anticipating the End Days with joy in their hearts but taking political action to bring about the conditions they think are prerequisites. . . . [T]hese people are not funny at all. . . they put their allegiance to their creed ahead of their commitment to democracy, to peace, to (earthly) justice—and to

truth. If push comes to shove, some of them are prepared to lie and even to kill. . . . Are they a lunatic fringe? They are certainly dangerously out of touch with reality, but it is hard to know how many they are.”

We may not know how many there are, but Dennett has a list of eleven names, Senators and Representatives who are members of the “Family” or “Fellowship Foundation,” “a secretive Christian organization that has been influential in Washington, D.C. for decades,” and “may be pursuing policies that are antithetical to those of the democracy of which these congressmen are elected to represent.” Confusingly, he calls for these “nonfanatical Christians” to expose the End Times movement, conducting “an objective investigation” into “the possible presence of fanatical adherents in positions of power in the government and the military.”

This is Dennett’s sophistry at its best, or perhaps an example of his own anti-religious fanaticism. He wants the “nonfanatical” members of an organization he fears is fanatical to investigate themselves. He gives the congressional members of the “Family” the choice between being conspirators or useful idiots. Are we supposed to be impressed with the clever way in which the rubric of the End Times movement allows him to lump together sponsoring the National Prayer Breakfast, secret anti-democratic diplomacy, fanatics in positions of power, people who

will lie and kill to get what they want—and all with complete deniability on his own part (“I explicitly called them nonfanatical”)? Dennett argues that one of the sources of the religion meme’s success is the appeal of secretive power operating behind the scenes; evidently Dennett stands ready to exploit that power, despite his claim to “gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives.”

The question is: why should a firm advocate of reason and investigation and evidence like Dennett have to resort to such low tactics? Dennett runs up against the same problem again and again—the problem that Enlightenment critiques of religious belief have confronted for centuries. It is exemplified in the following passage: “There is only one way to respect the substance of any purported God-given moral edict: consider it conscientiously in the full light of reason, using all the evidence at our command. No God that was pleased by displays of unreasoning love would be worthy of worship.” Yet on moral questions—on what ways of life deserve our deepest devotion—it is precisely the authority of reason, and its limits, that remains in question. And between modern reason embodied in experimental science and ancient revelation updated by tradition, it is not at all clear that modern scientific rationality has the upper hand.

After all, modern science is predicated on a fact/value distinction that effectively prevents it from asking fundamental normative questions, let alone answering them. “What is the purpose of the universe, and my life in it?” is not a question science proposes to answer. Dennett is fully aware of the distinction between facts and values. Because he accepts that values cannot be settled by facts, he believes we need “a political process of mutual persuasion and education” in which we “reason together.” But it is far from clear why scientific rationality should be the sole arbiter of this political process, designed to settle the very kinds of questions from which it cuts itself off. And it is hardly clear that a religiously naked democracy will really produce better answers to our eternal moral questions, or a society more worthy of moral esteem.

Early in his career, Leo Strauss was convinced that even the most ardent Enlightenment skeptic had some sense of the standoff between reason and revelation. “The tenets that the world is the creation of an omnipotent God, that miracles are therefore possible in it, that man is in need of revelation for the guidance of his life, cannot be refuted by experience or by the principle of contradiction.” It is not that Dennett misses this aspect of religious faith entirely. He knows it implies a claim not subject to scientific confirma-

tion. But while the scientist must be a skeptic concerning miracles, he cannot prove that skepticism is the only appropriate attitude. Dennett claims that “the only way to take the hypothesis of miracles seriously is to eliminate the nonmiraculous alternatives.” What he should have said was the only way for *science* to take the hypothesis of miracles seriously is to eliminate the nonmiraculous alternatives. For the believer, miracles will remain facts in a value-laden providential order, values science does not even attempt to touch on. For while science concedes the realm of value as a first principle of its particular kind of rationality, religion is hardly willing to concede the realm of facts.

Rather than being two different kinds of experience, science and religion are better seen as two different horizons in which experience takes place. Viewed from the point of view of science, Dennett may be correct that what we call faith is really “belief in belief,” the willingness to trust that which we cannot really know or verify for ourselves. As an adherent of scientific rationalism, he acknowledges that two observers may look at the same evidence and draw opposite conclusions. Why not apply that thought more broadly, acknowledging that the world would look different whether seen through the prism of reason or through the prism of revelation? From this point of view, his book has some of the “quixotic” and hence “not very important” char-

acter he attributes to efforts to prove or disprove the existence of God. Dennett may well be aware that his privileging of scientific rationality over faith in public debate is purely rhetorical—perhaps even unreasonable. But the fact that reason should not pretend to know what it does not know does not stop him.

According to Strauss, the result of the standoff between orthodoxy and the Enlightenment was twofold: “Man had to establish himself theoretically and practically as master of the world and master of his life; the world created by him had to erase the world merely ‘given’ to him; then orthodoxy would be more than refuted—it would be outlived.” *Breaking the Spell* is written in the knowledge that for all the success of modern science, all the world is not secular Europe, nor does it show signs of rapidly becoming so. The “fortress of orthodoxy” which the Enlightenment project left behind has proven itself capable of more than rearguard actions—sometimes in ways that awaken the best human possibilities, sometimes in ways that elicit the worst. Dennett writes in the hope that as science shows ever greater ability to explain ever more things, as it provides ever more plausible alternative stories about the real origins of religious belief, the fortress may be besieged and starved out. Religion, once and for all, will be outlived.

But, not unreasonably, he is not confident on this point. That

explains why a book that professes to treat religious belief seriously and respectfully contains so many little epigrammatic digs at religion from sages like Andy Rooney. Mockery, Strauss wrote, was the great weapon the Enlightenment deployed against an orthodoxy it could not rationally refute. “Mockery of the teaching of the tradition is not the successor of a prior refutation of those teachings... but it is the refutation: it is in mockery that the liberation from ‘prejudices’ that had supposedly already been cast off is actually first accomplished.” In other words: If you can’t beat them, ridicule them.

Dennett’s unwillingness to admit the limits of scientific rationality has consequences throughout the book. For example, it leads him to misrepresent William James, for whose work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he professes great respect. At one point, he quotes James out of context, making him agree with a point that James is in fact criticizing, precisely in a context where James is about to articulate his sense of the limitations that science’s assumptions create for its ability to understand religion. Or again, it leads Dennett to trivialize the otherwise perfectly justified question posed by Avery Cardinal Dulles, who wonders “how God comes to us and opens up a world of meaning not accessible to human investigative powers.” For Cardinal Dulles, “personal testi-

mony” is the answer to this question. That is unacceptable to Dennett. For unless such testimony will subject itself to the scrutiny of scientific rationality, it is mere data concerning memes in a mind.

But Dulles’s point is defensible. One cannot see the signs of God if one does not know what to look for. Exodus gives extended testimony to the difficulty, even with miracles, of maintaining a belief in God’s presence in history. How much harder will it be for those who must content themselves with the daily round of miracles (the world continues to exist!) which familiarity makes invisible?

Not unfairly, Dennett derides the sloppy and incoherent jumble of ideas by which all too many people define their faith. But so does Cardinal Dulles. The salient difference in this context is that Dulles holds, not unreasonably, that people can be educated through personal witness to see more clearly what is otherwise only dimly evident. Witness is not the only path here; revealed religions, like many others, are full of techniques of discipline and education. To dismiss these wholesale as indoctrination or obfuscation is just more mocking.

People without faith seem to believe that it is something easy and comfortable, and for some that may be true. But for serious believers, faith is a hard climb, an ever-renewed challenge. There is no reason in prin-

ciple to think that the truth about the world articulated through revelation is any easier to comprehend, any more obvious, any less requiring of sustained effort and attention, than is quantum mechanics—which, as Richard Feynman famously said, “nobody understands.”

Dennett’s worries about the bad things done in the name of religion can only be shared by decent people. But however dressed up they are in the latest research of evolutionary psychology, Dennett is deploying the same old Enlightenment tropes that didn’t work all that well the first time around, and only confirm the sense of believers that crusaders for scientific rationality such as

himself can smile and smile and still be villains. That seems an unpromising start for confronting fanaticism. If Dennett were a little less interested in conspiracies in high places, he might instead investigate what the memes are that allowed the United States over time to be an increasingly successful embodiment of Enlightenment ideals, a leader in free inquiry, science, and technology, and at the same time a bastion of generally tolerant orthodoxy. Surely a friend of science would find *those* memes worth propagating.

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