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 The Journal of Mind and Behavior  
 Summer and Autumn 2006, Volume 27, Numbers 3 and 4  
 Pages 357–366  
 ISSN 0271–0137

**Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon.** Daniel C. Dennett. New York, New York: Viking Penguin, 2006, 464 pages, \$25.95 hardcover.

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The thesis that Dennett argues for in *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* has a double aspect. First, religion being but one *natural* phenomenon among many should be subject to scientific investigation (p. 17). Resistance to this notion constitutes the first spell or taboo and is in complicity with the second “master” spell, that of the phenomenon of religion itself (pp. 18, 322). Dennett’s tentative naturalistic recommendation is two-pronged: he primarily deploys an evolutionary biology perspective, and derivatively a highly suggestive appeal to memetics. To acknowledge that religion is natural “is only the beginning of the answer, not the end” (p. 75). Religion as a natural phenomenon has to answer to Dennett’s Darwinist refrain — *cui bono?* (to whose advantage?). And derivatively, how or why highly exotic and implausible supernatural religious ideas (or memes) are transmitted and sustained? Humankind, naturally disposed cause-seeking creatures, are inclined to hypostatize all manner of beliefs (virtual agents free to evolve to amplify our yearnings or our dreads — pp. 114, 120, 123, 282) when explanation of some phenomenon is not forthcoming — this constitutes the “master” spell.

Dennett’s positive recommendations are, by his own admission, highly tentative: he offers up a family of proto-theories yet to be established and open to falsification, the Popperian demarcation between what constitutes science and what constitutes non-science (pp. 220, 309–310). The *cui bono* question bundles the questions: why does something exist?, what good does it do?, and at what price has it come about and is maintained? The evolutionary theorist has to be able to reconcile religion as an immensely costly endeavor, with the highly attuned efficiencies demanded by evolutionary biology (p. 69). The two standard responses are, that if religion has conferred fitness benefits on its adherents, then these benefits are accounted for by the “comfort” and “bonds of trust” hypotheses (p. 178).

Dennett offers rough and ready approximations of two families (not mutually exclusive) of evolutionary theories: *sweet-tooth* and *symbiont* theories. Is religion a

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I am grateful to the contributors to the Clayton and Simpson volume and to Alvin Goldman for giving me advanced copies or advanced drafts of their articles. My thanks also to Christian Onof (Birkbeck College, London) for his pointed remarks. Requests for reprints should be sent to Leslie Marsh, Centre for Research in Cognitive Science, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QH, United Kingdom. Email: l.marsh@sussex.ac.uk

confectionary delight for the brain analogous to the way sugar, alcohol and caffeine are (pp. 82–83)? Or is religion analogous to symbiosis association whereby a micro-organism (the symbiont) has an association with the larger organism (the host)? This association can take the form of a mutualist association whereby both partners benefit from the relationship; a parasitic symbiosis whereby one of the partners suffers a negative effect; and a commensal symbiosis if there is no beneficial or negative effect.

The conceptual tool Dennett deploys to approach the persistence of religious phenomena is via the highly speculative notion “memetics.” Memetics, the perpetuation and transmission of all ideas (religious ideas included), is analogous to genetically transmitted evolutionary “design”: ideas are analogous to a parasitic worm’s invading a host organism’s brain (p. 5). Dennett’s appeal to memetics supposedly does not prejudice the issue of whether “we’re talking about genetic or cultural evolution” (p. 82) and can in principle account for the excellence of design in religion without postulating the notion of rational designers (pp. 184–185). The upshot is, much like the domestication of animals and plants, so too have we domesticated the wild memes of folk religion. Needless to say, these memes have flourished under the stewardship of institutionalized religion (pp. 170, 177). The standard objection to the memetic aspect of Dennett’s theory is that there doesn’t appear to be any promising candidates to populate an ontology of cultural replication in an analogous way that there is in biology. This then is a summary of Dennett’s positive account.

Of course, the positive recommendations just outlined are part and parcel of Dennett’s negative task even though Dennett casts himself in the role of naturalistic *ambassador* (p. 24) as opposed to naturalistic *conquistador*. Religion, in Dennett’s view, is a formidable adversary not because it is beyond the ken of naturalistic explanation (p. 103) — but because even the mere positing of the idea that religion should be subject to a naturalistic explanation, engenders too rich a fuel for the engine of rational argument (p. 134). Though Dennett does acknowledge that many who engage in this type of explanatory enterprise do so for suspect reasons — they usually have an axe to grind (p. 32). The implication here is that Dennett *doesn’t* have an axe to grind. Whatever one means by this — a dispute, a point of view, having an agenda or ulterior motive — Dennett’s magnanimity is out of character. Given the tone of the book it just doesn’t ring true: we *expect* Dennett the brazen debunker.

So why does Dennett perceive the first spell to be such a taboo subject? Why “Is religion out-of-bounds to science?” (p. 29). Dennett pulls no punches in identifying a source that so vigorously promotes an intellectual protectionist policy. Resistance in Dennett’s view emanates not from, as one would expect, the uneducated mind, but rather from a constituency of intellectual sophisticates — professional academics that are hostile to science (pp. 34, 71–72, 208, 260, 262). Inquiry into the nature of religion is even more frustrated “by the scholarly friends of religion, many of who are atheistic or agnostic connoisseurs, not champions of any creed” (p. 259). Dennett’s diagnosis is that there are four often overlapping streams that conspire to obfuscate the issue: professional pride; unexamined postmodernist assumptions; entrenched methodological assumptions; and last but by no means least, science as subservient to political purpose.

For Dennett there is a significant constituency that has uncritically assimilated the tenets of postmodernism and its relativistic presuppositions (p. 262). These tendencies have generated a plethora of ideologically inspired pseudo-theorizing berating science for not having any truth-value; unless of course science happens to

support what is already believed (p. 280). Dennett is hardly the lone ranger — the physicist, Alan Sokal, ignited the so-called “science wars” of the mid-1990s by duping this constituency. This dispute had an earlier incarnation in the early 1960s marked as the “two cultures” divide — the sciences and the humanities. Historically there has been the faultline of the “hard” versus “soft” sciences, the “physical” versus “social” sciences, the Diltheyan distinction between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaften* (p. 188). Dennett singles out Clifford Geertz (arguably the most well-known and influential anthropologist of the last thirty years) as perpetuating a now dated hermeneutic approach to all things cultural (p. 261). In the philosophy of religion, some have taken the highly contested notion of “Wittgensteinian fideism” (premised on Wittgenstein’s notions of “language games” and “forms of life”), as support for the idea that expressions of religious beliefs can only be understood only by those imbued by a particular religion.

Let us be clear. Dennett does not declare religious behavior to be irrational: he is in accord with some sociologists of religion that reject a 300-year orthodoxy that has claimed that religious behavior was irrational. Acceptance of this proposition gives methodological purchase to the idea that the study of religious phenomenon *can* be undertaken by a non-believer, and hence is open, contra Geertz, to a universalizable naturalistic inquiry (p. 183). Dennett is “not suggesting that science should *try to do* what religion does, but that it should *study*, scientifically, *what* religion does” (pp. 29–31). Dennett is ecumenical: he fully acknowledges the validity of the social sciences and the humanities and recommends a pluralistic multidisciplinary approach to understanding religion (pp. 14, 71–72, 264). In fact, Dennett’s recommendation is minimal: that is, do more research (p. 311). This is *the* message of the book (p. 103).

Anti-science ideologues will misunderstand (or perhaps purposively overlook) the very modest proposal that Dennett is putting forward. It’s ironic, according to Dennett, that many of the researchers who have already examined some aspect of religious behavior “have been far more conscientious in their attempt to get a sympathetic informed view of religion than the self-appointed defenders of religion” (p. 263). Indeed, the clarion call for interdisciplinary investigation into religious phenomena comes from philosophical theologians such as Jensine Andresen and Robert Forman (2000). The standard argument against a scientific consideration of religion is that whatever benefits accrue to humankind through religion, they will be destroyed by the investigation (p. 45). This is a thoroughly disingenuous conjunction. The results of any scientific inquiry should be of interest to the believer and the non-believer *without any diminution or corrosion to their respective existential positions* (pp. 15, 154, 203; Mackie, 1982, p. 219; Yandell, 1993, p. 1).

This brings us to the nature of religious belief or as Dennett phrases it “belief in belief” (Chapter 8). Dennett discusses the different epistemological presuppositions of science and religion and the social dimension to holding scientific and religious beliefs. While we may not understand scientific propositions, they are in principle understandable and testable. The same can’t be said of religious beliefs — there is no methodology available *even* to the so-called religious experts. And though belief in belief is not confined to religion, it is by the far the “most fecund engine of elaboration” (p. 204). Dennett’s diffuse discussion dilutes what’s at issue. There are three possible options concerning the nature of religious belief:

- (1) they cannot correspond to anything in the real world, so are either false or meaningless;

- (2) they do correspond to things in a supernatural realm, of which they can be true or false; or
- (3) religious beliefs are not beliefs properly so-called. They are to be removed from the realm of the factual, whether natural or supernatural, and reduced to the realm of practical commitments and attitudes.

My reading of Dennett is that he'd subscribe to (1): "though not at all restricted to religion, belief in belief is nowhere else a more fecund engine of elaboration" (p. 204). The third approach was espoused by R.B. Braithwaite (1955/1971); it has clear similarities to R.M. Hare's (1952) view of moral beliefs/principles as attitudinal commitments. My own view straddles (1) and (2). I think that religious "beliefs" are genuinely beliefs, so that in this respect religion falls within the sphere of the theoretical, but that religious beliefs in fact correspond to nothing in the natural or supernatural worlds. So they are all false or at least they lack rational warrant. This is similar to Mackie's (1977/1990) error theory of ethics. Mackie's error theory takes the view that moral judgments can indeed be true or false. But they are all false, because (though they are propositional or truth-claiming in logical form) there is no independently existing moral reality by virtue of which they can be true. Therefore they are one and all false. One needn't deny the existence of a supernatural world: I, for one, am a Kantian agnostic about any possible knowledge of it.

Two other sets of questions need to be addressed. First, there is a set of broadly theological questions about the relationship between faith and reason, between what one knows by way of reason, broadly construed, and what one knows by way of faith. These questions can be termed theological: one will find them of interest only if one thinks that in fact there is such a thing as faith. Like Dennett, I don't think that theology can be considered a proper object of *epistemological* study: the concept of God does not achieve enough clarity and distinctness to be discussable. When we cite the divine attributes — omniscience, omnipotence, and so on — I don't think we have the least purchase on these ideas ("God as intentional object," p. 210), which generate paradoxes almost immediately. Thus the epistemology of religious belief is not very interesting on two grounds. First, mainly because the central object of such belief, namely God, is conceptually incoherent, best put by Georg Lichtenberg who asked: "is our idea of God anything more than personified incomprehensibility?" When religious folk refer to God they literally don't know what they're talking about. How could they? If anything, this claim empowers the supernatural and should not be taken as an atheistic rant. Dennett cites with approval Roy Rapport's slogan that in religion "If postulates are to be unquestionable, it is important that they be incomprehensible" (p. 229). This again marks the Popperian demarcation criterion whereby "The postulation of invisible, undetectable effects are systematically immune to confirmation or disconfirmation" (p. 164).

Secondly, there is a set of questions having to do with whether and to what degree religious beliefs have warrant, or justification, or positive epistemic status. Whenever there are appeals by believers to warrant as believers, *they do not have to, neither would it, change their beliefs*. When the believer does appeal to warrant it is a strategy to engage, and convince non-believers — beyond the realm of religious belief, in the realm of "rationality." Herein lies the paradox: an appeal to the common coin of rationality that is not even required and is not even welcome by many believers.

This brings us to a less esoteric, but no less complex, epistemological issue — that of the relationship of religion to politics — an issue that hovers in the background to all the discussion but is never submitted to a sustained analysis by Dennett. There

are two fronts to the debate concerning relationship between religion and politics. The first is home-grown and emanates from an alliance between a political Right and the intelligent design movement. The second is a broader front and concerns the general relationship of religion to politics. It is prudent to examine the latter first.

There are at least three logical angles and historically four varieties of the relationship of politics to religion, the latter cannot be considered here. Logically, there is:

- (a) the relationship between toleration and persecution;
- (b) the claim that a religion implies an epistemology and that an epistemology in turn implies, or has implications for, a view of politics; and
- (c) the claim that one can derive political conclusions from religious premises.

Consideration of (a) is beyond the scope of this discussion. In (b) and (c) a religion implies an epistemology and an epistemology implies, or has implications for, a view of politics. The problem is to know how tight the implications are. As far as Christianity is concerned, a Christian cannot “just believe.” Something is being assumed about their epistemological status. According to natural theology, for example, the existence of God as a spiritual being can be demonstrated by reason. On other approaches, the matter is not one of demonstration but of faith. There are other points as well. If prayer is a means by which God’s grace is conveyed to us, how are we to distinguish what God genuinely tells us in prayer from what we mistakenly suppose him to be saying? A Christian will have to make assumptions about these things, regardless of whether he or she can explicate anything very sophisticated.

If a religion implies an epistemology what then of the idea that an epistemology implies a view politics? In general terms there must be such an implication: crudely, if you rule out the possibility of certain kinds of knowledge in general, then you disallow any appeal to those kinds of knowledge in politics. But there is a real difficulty in drawing out any systematic connections between say, Christian epistemology and politics. The central text of Christianity, the New Testament, and the time-hallowed creeds and confessions (the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession and so forth) contain hardly any political reference. There is only a scattering of New Testament passages from which political implications can be drawn. The import of these passages is often ambiguous. At the very least, nothing like a definite and comprehensive view of political life can be extracted straightforwardly from the prime traditional sources. This means that for the Christian there is a tension. On the one hand, the Christian life is integral and demanding to the ultimate degree. There is no God-free conduct permissible, or even coherently imaginable, to the Christian in any area of life and that includes politics. On the other hand, the basic sources give only the barest, flickering indication of how this can be done.

The term “fundamentalist” has come to be synonymous with (c) — it is unfortunately yet another term that is blithely used in popular discourse. Dennett only tangentially examines the notion (pp. 190–191, 225) even though it is implicit in much of his discussion. “Fundamentalism” is fundamentalist because the *epistemology* it appeals to is distinctly *foundational*. Fundamentalism’s task is to identify those beliefs which one is entitled to feel quite sure of, and that are not themselves grounded upon, or justified in terms of, other beliefs. Such beliefs can be intuitively grounded or logically derived. The problem is, as Dennett repeatedly points out, that beliefs “derived” through intuition cannot have any epistemic status: “the Bible says evolution is false” (p. 61). Of course this is as preposterous as claiming that the

author of the Fourth Gospel could have wanted to write an email. The most prominent general argument against immediate (fundamentalist/foundationalist) justification is a “level ascent” argument, according to which whatever is taken to immediately justify a belief can only do so if the subject is justified in supposing that the putative justifier has what it takes to do so. Hence, since the justification of the original belief depends on the justification of the higher level belief just specified, the justification is not immediate after all. To meet this objection the standard resort is to derive mixed premisses: e.g., “supporting democracy is a political form of loving one’s neighbor as oneself,” a premise that combines religious and political concepts and would allow the above political prescription to be deduced. Of course, this just relocates the problem, for how are the mixed premisses to be derived? Are they deliverances of natural law or just fallible moral judgments by the individual? A cruder strategy requires one starting off with a conclusion that one finds congenial — “evolution is false” — and then set about fabricating the ciphery by which one can pretend to have arrived at this conclusion. What makes fundamentalism such an alarming cocktail is that fundamentalism offers a *substantive* theory of the human good; that is promoted through an *activist* style of politics; and involves a *rejection* of other intellectual encrustations. In essence it rejects the presuppositions of liberal civil society which surely must be the Occident’s greatest and hardest won achievement.

A homegrown species of (c) is the alliance forged between “religionists” and intelligent design theorists. What began as creationism has morphed into intelligent design theory, the latter dispensing with the God of the scriptures and in place posits a generic design intelligence that may or may not engender religious connotation. The common feature to both variants is the unabashed rejection of evolutionary theory, and a materialist metaphysic at large. Intelligent design theory might be considered innocuous if it merely marked an interesting and deep philosophical question: that is, whether science is explanatorily closed, whether the ultimate explanations provided by science are in need of supplementation. Whatever the scientific and/or philosophical merits of intelligent design theory, its crude politicization renders it *neither scientific nor philosophical*. The intelligent design movement thus seems to have opted for a strategy of socio-political endorsement (intelligent design to be included on public education syllabi), thereby circumventing the “materialist dogma” that is characteristic of the scientific (and much of the philosophical) establishment. This strategy — Trojan-like — disguises itself within the public domain as continuous with a scientific orthodoxy. Though intelligent design makes a very forceful anti-relativistic statement, it derives tacit support from an ambient postmodern relativism, whereby intelligent design theory is promoted as “just another valid competing theory” worthy of scientific consideration (Goldman, in press).

I don’t think that Dennett has given sufficient conceptualization to the epistemological infelicities generated by those who would confuse religion, science and politics. He doesn’t address the question of whether resistance to naturalistic explanation as a *political* stance is conceptually internal to the Judaic/Christian/Islamic tradition; or is politics an expedience for the promotion of religion by other means? Dennett, in allowing the compound notion of a politicized religion to be conceptually internal to religious experience, lets the intelligent design movement off the hook and *a fortiori*, the fundamentalist impulse at large. Once one allows a politicized religion, it inevitably smuggles in a politicized science. My position should not be taken to be akin to Stephen Jay Gould’s “fudge” whereby science and religion are non-overlapping *magisteria* (p. 30). My diagnosis is somewhat different: my claim is that there is an epistemological disjunction, a disjunction of irrelevance or an igno-

*ratio elenchi*: that is, a process of argument that fails to establish its relevant conclusion. If intelligent design theorists are making a scientific claim, they have to appeal to standards of scientific rationality — it is fallacious to think that the political realm can and should mediate the *substantive* claims of science.

Another old chestnut that Dennett rightly spends some time on is the relationship between religion and morality (pp. 278–307). Specifically, Dennett decouples the notion of atheism from the notion of immorality (p. 303, 305–306; Mackie, 1982, pp. 254–257, 260). Dennett’s complaint that religion is for the most part taken as the bulwark of morality and meaning (p. 245) can partly be laid at philosophy’s doorstep. Most philosophers in the analytical tradition don’t really have existential religious problems; they take up religious questions because they recognize the questions at an intellectual level — I’d exclude the likes of Alvin Plantinga.

The moral point of view assumes a world of distinct agents and the question is: “How is one to treat other people?” Or “what reasons do your interests give me for acting?” The standpoint is basically egocentric. Now, many moralists hold that another person’s interests do give me rationally sufficient reasons for acting. In saying that morality is egocentric, I’m not saying it’s egoistic; ethical egoism is a minority view. But the moral perspective on human life is that of interacting agents whose interests can and do diverge and who require reasons for treating one another as ends in themselves.

The religious perspective is different: it sees everything, not as interdependent, but as internally related — the world of distinct agents is a picture that refuses to form. (If X and Y are interdependent then at some level they are distinct. If they are internally related they’re not ultimately separable enough to be interdependent.) This has some Biblical sanction in such images as Jesus’s saying that he is the vine and his disciples are the branches; or St. Paul’s idea that Christians are members one of another. Another way of conceiving the relationship between morality and the religion is through Oakeshott’s (1975, p. 86) view that “a man may enact himself religiously, but there are no religious actions.” Though the point is not well expressed, it is not difficult to understand. In considering the epistemological status of religious beliefs I think Oakeshott inclines to or adopts the third approach outlined above. In this view there can’t be any religious actions in the sense of actions embodying religious beliefs because what we refer to as religious beliefs are not really such. Put another way: if, for example, “sin” is a concept without an objective correlate — if the concept and “beliefs” involving it don’t correspond to anything in the natural or supernatural world — there can’t be any sinful actions. No ontological inventory will include sin or actions embodying it. On the other hand, a person plainly can act sinfully, and be judged by others to do so, relative to *practical* commitments and attitudes. I don’t think this has to correspond to the primacy of practice of folk religion (pp. 160–161) which, on becoming the object of second-order reflection, hardens into a salient social force (p. 200). For a useful conceptualization of the relationship of morality to religion see Bartley (1971) and W.G. de Burgh (1938).

What then is a religion? Christians and atheists alike have always been aware that some forms of religious practice have questionable existential authenticity in that they are perfectly functional to consumerist culture. Alastair MacIntyre has argued that American churches have assimilated notions of the secular so deeply, it would be improper to speak of them as being continuous with a religious tradition (MacIntyre, 1967; see also Tawney, 1926/1938). Dennett is absolutely correct to say that any attempt to *define* religion is a problematic enterprise (p. 7). A.J. Toynbee’s

search for a common essence, a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions across all religions, was doomed to failure. We are dealing with (and this is Dennett's avowed view) a Wittgensteinian family resemblance concept; the idea that there are overlapping similarities, *typical* features, between a variety of things by virtue of which we bring them under the heading of "religion." With this in mind it is odd that Dennett then reverts to essentialist sounding words like "define" and "core." Dennett offers a tentative characterization of religion "as social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought" (p. 9). Furthermore, he writes that the *core* "invokes gods who are effective agents in real time, and who play a central role in the way the participants think about what they ought to do" (pp. 11–12) — this has a strong essentialist flavor. Later he adds that since canonical religious beliefs cannot be subject to the standard evidential claims for truth "this is as good as a defining characteristic of religious creeds" (p. 238). It might appear the height of paradox to say that there can be a godless religion. Yet I think this is perfectly possible — certainly if God is thought of as a personal being that knows, loves and guides our lives. For Dennett while "It is entirely possible to be an atheist and believe in belief in God" it's a notion incoherently held (p. 221). Dennett would also probably reject the coherence of Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" even though we live in a *de facto* Christianized civil society. Buddhism is often accounted a religion but a Buddhist does not believe in this kind of God. Matthew Arnold's definition of religion as "morality touched by emotion" is generally regarded as inadequate. As Dennett rightly points out, this can certainly be found beyond religion: "[T]here is humility, and awe and sheer delight at the glory of the evolutionary landscape" (p. 268). We could also add aesthetic experience. Some religions put more stress on conformity with the regulations of religious law than others. Finally, the ethical element is far from trouble-free. For example, are certain kinds of action good because God wills and commands them, as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham held, or does God will and command them because they are good, as Aquinas held (p. 267)?

By way of conclusion, whatever the explanatory virtues of Dennett's tentative theories are, I'm none the wiser as to who Dennett is addressing. Is the stumbling block to offering a scientific account of religious phenomena our postmodern academic, methodological anti-naturalism, theologians in general, pseudo-scientists, bona fide scientists who have a religious sensibility, religious fundamentalism or is he making a valid general political point? *En masse*, this group constitutes the first spell. But Dennett's aims are ambiguous: the "spell" of the title is explicitly conjoined to another spell, the "master" spell of the phenomenon of religion itself. Is Dennett's project delimited by breaking the "first" spell, or is the dissolution of the first spell the prelude to demolishing the second spell? If both, Dennett's scattergun approach severely dilutes his critique. Given his declared focus on the "situation in America" (p. xiii), my sense is that he is primarily motivated by the homegrown intelligent design debate. There is a distinct sense that Dennett has been egged on by the urgency inherent in the current socio-political climate, a climate where religion is implicated (perhaps "misappropriated" is the better term).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dennett reports that only 25% of the US population understands that evolution is as well established as the fact that water is H<sub>2</sub>O (p. 60). For the results of several polls conducted on this topic, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/science.htm>. Dawkins (2006, p. 4) makes the astonishing claim that "The status of atheists in America today is on a par with that of homosexuals fifty years ago."

This book, aimed at a broader audience than academic philosophy, has attracted a great deal of attention. Seeking to present one's case to as broad an audience as possible is in itself not a bad thing. But one has the sense that *Breaking the Spell* is more read about than read. The haughtiness of the term "bright" (p. 21, 245), not coined by Dennett but endorsed by him, and denoting a loose coalition of non-believers, is irritating. The term fails to capture many who are not out of sympathy with the naturalistic project: I, for one, would prefer to be called an Epicurean, skeptic or humanist, terms that have immeasurably richer connotations.<sup>2</sup> The publisher's decision to offer short summaries of each chapter and trail the forthcoming chapter hands a ready-made crib sheet to the less than conscientious hack. Stylistically, *Breaking the Spell* is well below par because Dennett, even in his most technical of books, is the most accessible and lively of writers around. (The dumping of the so-called "academic" material into appendixes is lazy — other material should have been worked into the body of the text.) There are of course some wonderful flourishes, the one that I find most amusing and memorable is: "Sperm are like e-mail spam, so cheap to make and deliver that a vanishingly small return rate is sufficient to underwrite the project" (p. 59).

Substantively, I think Dennett is off form. In a distinguished publishing career spanning almost forty years and notable for anticipating and initiating trends, this is his first failure (to be fair, few can match this record and this accounts for my attenuated enthusiasm). With his long held bipartite interest in mind and evolution, Dennett would have been just the man to attempt *le Grand Projet* of explaining the cognitive evolutionary basis of religion: the presupposition that religion is the product of normal (evolutionary) psychological dispositions is shared across disciplines (Boyer, 2003). Dennett himself poses an excellent question that is ripe for research: what, if anything, differentiates the acquisition and dissemination of secular beliefs from religious beliefs (p. 318). And even if neuroscientists do find a "god center" in the brain (which Dennett doubts — p. 315), the Darwinian scientist would want to know *why* the god center evolved (p. 139).

In writing and then vigorously promoting *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett has simply wasted time sniping at all and sundry: a compelling case against creationist "science" had already been made some twenty-five years earlier by Philip Kitcher (1982), much of the recent discussion of intelligent design theory can be interpolated here. If the Clayton and Simpson volume (in press) is any indication, there is a burgeoning level of interest in the relationship between religion, contemplative experience and the sciences, allowing for several disciplinary approaches and gradations of opinion, though not without controversy.<sup>3</sup> This trend goes some way in sidelining the *parti pris* postmodern ideologue. Furthermore, there is already an abundance of hard-headed discussion on the nature of religious belief (Mackie, 1982; Yandell, 1993). Two of the most prominent of this breed of atheist philosopher, Michael Martin and Kai Nielsen, have been completely overlooked by Dennett and Dawkins (2006). Speaking of Dawkins, he offers a more journalistically polished and less restrained

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<sup>2</sup>According the Brights' website, "A bright is a person who has a naturalistic worldview; A bright's worldview is free of supernatural and mystical elements; The ethics and actions of a bright are based on a naturalistic worldview [<http://www.the-brights.net/>]."

<sup>3</sup>There seems to be controversy concerning a major funding source to the so-called "reconciliationist" movement: <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i31/31b01801.htm>. See also Dennett, p. 276.

invective than Dennett, more effectively (though not to my complete satisfaction) addressing the demonology of beliefs and attitudes of playground derision (liberal and atheist to note just two); a ragbag of relativistic and permissive notions supposedly peddled by “tenured liberal professors” (p. 53). Beyond the knock-about table-thumping polemics of Dennett and Dawkins, the serious reader will want to counterpose the atheist viewpoint with the wonderfully subtle theistic view as offered by thinkers such as Newman (1870/1955).

*Breaking the Spell's* dust-jacket hyperbole just perverts the reader's expectations (be they like-minded or detractors) of what is in fact an eminently sensible and sober subject matter. Against a prevailing socio-cultural climate of feigned indignation and cultivated notoriety, *Breaking the Spell* is not as provocative as either Dennett or his detractors think it is. Dennett is relatively restrained when considered against a two-thousand year tradition of religious skepticism: Dante had long since had a place reserved for us Epicureans in his sixth circle of hell.

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