



# Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

By Daniel C. Dennett

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**The *New York Times* bestseller – a “crystal-clear, constantly engaging” (Jared Diamond) exploration of the role that religious belief plays in our lives and our interactions**

For all the thousands of books that have been written about religion, few until this one have attempted to examine it scientifically: to ask why—and how—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 religion’s evolution from “wild” folk belief to “domesticated” 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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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

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*)

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From Scientific American

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.*

From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

The debate about Daniel C. Dennett's new book has been lively from the get-go. Dennett has already had cause to respond to the *New York Times* regarding Leon Wielseltier's reduction of his book to "a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions." Wielseltier's charge of scientism ("the view that science can explain all human conditions") is one that Dennett admits wholeheartedly; the author of *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) just doesn't care to have his philosophy so summarily dismissed as an "ism." In fact, honest criticism about the book is obscured by the attack on Dennett's ideas. Most reviewers concur that *Breaking the Spell* presents an intriguing argument for the scientific investigation of religion but that the author's difficult prose and prejudices bog it down.

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## Users Review

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**Cassandra Martin:**

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