

## BOOKS &amp; ARTS

# A natural history of religion

A darwinian philosopher turns his attention to the strength of religion in the United States.

## Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

Daniel C. Dennett

Viking/Allen Lane: 2006. 488 pp. \$25.95.

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### Michael Ruse

The US presidential election of 2004 showed that the nation is divided. On either coast the states are blue, a colour that, somewhat confusingly for Europeans, represents the political left. In the middle are the red states, which are on the right. But this is more than just a political divide. It is also very much a religious one, with the people of the red states being largely enthusiastic evangelicals; the blue states host a motley collection of episcopalians, unitarians and others, joined uneasily by non-believers of various shades.

It is against this background that we should read *Breaking the Spell* by the US philosopher Daniel Dennett, a notorious non-believer. You would not expect this book to bring comfort to Christians, and it certainly does not. So little impressed is Dennett by religion's claims to truth that he does not even bother to produce new material. He simply quotes at length from earlier writings. He is nevertheless trying to move the discussion forward, following in the tradition of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume and providing a natural history of religion. Dennett aims to give an account of how and why religion appeared, and how and why it has held it has today. As you might expect, given that he is an ardent darwinian, for Dennett religion and its origins are ultimately a matter of biological fitness to survive and conquer.

In the United States today there is a need for a good book on religion, and on how we might start to bridge the gap between red and blue. There is much that is pertinent to this end in Dennett's discussion. I was particularly interested in his coverage of the ways in which US mega-churches cater to people's needs and wants. In a sense, it is all a bit like toothpaste or automobiles — who has the product with the edge that captures the consumer's attention and opens his or her wallet? Do not bother with details such as the Trinity or the meaning of Grace — just make sure there is plenty of free parking and baby-sitting. There is a message here for those of us who think that all this would be farcical were it not for the fact that people

who attend such institutions tend to hold moral and social values that lead to anti-abortion fanaticism, capital punishment, excommunication of gays and lesbians, and dangerous military excursions in the Near East. If we do not like what the churches are feeding people, we had better come up with an attractive alternative.

Ultimately, taken as a whole, Dennett's is not the book for which we search. He does give some prescriptions for action, generally (and admirably) involving education. But basically there is something off-key about the whole discussion. Part of the problem is philosophical. A major plank in Dennett's discussion is that religion is all smoke and mirrors, so even if we cannot hope immediately to eliminate all religious belief, those of us in the know will realize that we are dealing with a delusion, rather than a rationally justified belief system. However, a naturalistic analysis of religion in itself has no direct bearing on the truth of religious claims. My eyes are the end products of a long process of natural selection. Does that make any less real the truck I see bearing down on me as I stand in the middle of the road?

Most problematic is Dennett's blind spot regarding history. There is no real account of the way religion has developed and of how we have ended up where we are today. Another major weakness is the exclusive focus on the United States, which is a peculiar country where

religion plays a huge role, far bigger than in most of Europe. This difference is reflected in many diverse ways, particularly in the social values mentioned above. You cannot begin to talk about biological bases for religion — 'genes for God' and that sort of thing — without taking account of the fact that peoples of very similar biological background behave in very different ways about religion and its implications. Only history — the fact that the United States was founded by people with major religious concerns, and that this has persisted for four centuries — can help us to tease apart the cultural and the biological.

Dennett asks whether only a true believer can report properly on religion. He argues strongly that on a topic this important we all can, and should, engage. I agree. However, a degree of empathy is needed, and it is this that is missing. Unless you have some sense of what fires people up, you are never going to reach them or have any hope of shifting their beliefs. The debate over religion in the United States is intense and profoundly affects the status of science. I hardly have to remind *Nature* readers of the battle to introduce 'intelligent design' into biology classrooms. But we need better books than this to address the issues. ■

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