

Religion and science: a reply to a right-wing attack on philosopher Daniel Dennett

By James Brookfield
21 March 2006

The 19 February 2006 issue of the *New York Times Book Review* carries a tendentious attack on *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, the latest work by American philosopher Daniel Dennett.

Dennett is best known as a philosopher of evolutionary biology and for his earlier books, *Consciousness Explained* and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*—works that make significant contributions to the defense of Darwinism and philosophical materialism. In his earlier books, Dennett showed himself to be a skilled and thoughtful popularizer of the most important philosophical ramifications of the modern conception of evolution, and a shrewd exposé of many of the superficial attempts to discredit it or sow confusion about it. He is also acutely sensitive to the politically reactionary role played by those who are now attempting to reintroduce creationism under the guise of “intelligent design.” Dennett is himself an ardent atheist. In the intellectual climate that prevails in academia, these positions require a laudable degree of courage.

Breaking the Spell proposes a radical venture: to make a scientific study of religion. Dennett rejects the idea of the late Stephen Jay Gould that religion and science occupy two separate “magesteria” that ought to and can co-exist peacefully as long as neither intrudes on the other’s dominion. Dennett refuses to abide by the injunction that scientists should refrain from looking too closely at religion.

Dennett’s proposal to study religion does not mean only subjecting religion’s claims to logical scrutiny. It is not for him only a matter of counterposing religion to science. Instead, he seeks to use the methods of science to inquire into the natural reasons for the continued prevalence of religion. Why is it, he asks, that religion has not only survived, but expanded in influence even after its claims about the world have been shown to be false?

Dennett’s book does not attempt the exhaustive investigation that it proposes, but it does provide an introduction to a significant body of existing literature on the subject and proposes a number of potential avenues of development and inquiry. Dennett is undeniably correct to claim that a taboo exists that creates real barriers to the study he proposes. To look at religion under the scrutinizing microscope of science is regarded, within the prevailing intellectual climate, as entirely unacceptable.

Dennett is also right to insist that such a study is all the more necessary in light of the immense political influence still wielded by religion in modern life. For this reason, he expects hostility not only from the official representatives of the major religious denominations, but especially from those academics and intellectuals eager to defend religion for essentially political reasons.

A particularly banal and duplicitous example of such a “defense” of religion was provided in Leon Wieseltier’s assessment of the book, which appeared in the February, 19 issue of the *New York Times Book Review*. Wieseltier is the literary editor of the *New Republic*, a journal in which the right-wing trajectory of the Democratic Party intersects with that of the Republican neo-conservative right. Wieseltier embodies the

magazine’s orientation. He is crass defender of American imperialism and a member of the Project for a New American Century, which argued for an invasion of Iraq from the time of the group’s inception in the mid-1990s. Prior to this review, Wieseltier’s most recent polemical exercise was a denunciation of Steven Spielberg’s film *Munich* for being “anti-Israel.”

The first question that ought to be asked about Wieseltier’s review is why he was asked to submit it in the first place. One presumes that the *Times Book Review* could have easily called upon an expert in philosophy, biology, anthropology or comparative religion, to suggest only the most obvious disciplines. Instead it decided to commission a right-wing ideologue to perform a hatchet job on Dennett’s book. Given Wieseltier’s religious and political commitments, his selection is highly significant because of what it says about the agenda of the *New York Times Book Review* editors. They chose him in order to give a platform to a defender of religion to attack science.

Wieseltier knows enough to realize that religion cannot be defended by attempting to refute what science has to say about it. There is between religion and science a giant intellectual mismatch, so Wieseltier must take another tack. The basic thrust of his review is that Dennett has vastly exaggerated the competency of science and, in doing so, has corrupted it. His central claim is that Dennett has lapsed into “scientism,” which he defines as “the view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical.” “Scientism,” according to Wieseltier, is “a superstition” and *Breaking the Spell* is “a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions.”

This statement is as absurd as it is reactionary. Science is the antithesis of superstition, resting on testable claims and evidence and rejecting all supernatural explanations of phenomena. Individual scientists may be superstitious, but they do so only to the extent that they temporarily set aside the scientific method.

Wieseltier’s claim that Dennett’s views amount to “superstition” is the type of cheap rhetorical sleight-of-hand that is often employed by proponents of religion to tar skeptics and atheists. “Ah,” they say as though they had made a real discovery, “atheism is simply your religion.” They wish to obscure the fact that religion and science have fundamentally different criteria for truth and make them seem, instead, to be merely different outlooks. They argue that the outlook of “scientism” (an epithet they employ to refer to confidence in conclusions drawn by scientific methods), avoids consideration of the emotional and aesthetic sides of human life.

Dennett, Wieseltier would like us to believe, is nothing more than the most simpleminded biological reductionist who claims that all of life, including human life, can be directly and immediately reduced to its biology and evolution. Wieseltier presumes that religion may fill the place occupied by this straw man, once it is knocked down. The crudeness of Wieseltier’s attack is indicated in sweeping statements like, “Dennett is unable to imagine a fact about us that is not a biological fact.” Or, “For

Dennett, thinking historically absolves one of thinking philosophically.”

Of course, nowhere in the book does Dennett claim that to biology alone belongs the capability to explain all human phenomena. But Wieseltier is not writing as a serious advocate of science concerned that a co-thinker has made a factual error. He does not set out to correct Dennett’s alleged lapses and set science back on its feet. Rather, “scientism” is a bogeyman that Wieseltier has trotted out in order to absolve religion from scientific inquiry. What upsets Wieseltier is that Dennett is not willing to give religion a free ride and allow it and its claims to go unscrutinized.

“Scientism” is, according to Wieseltier, “one of the dominant superstitions of our day.” The reader can only be amazed at the statement. The US, not to mention the rest of the world, is hardly suffering from too much science. If the broad public were so convinced of the scientific outlook, Mr. Dennett would have had no need to write his book. In fact, the official intellectual climate is characterized by a continuing retreat from the conclusions that science has drawn in the face of a renewed offensive by those promoting religious, antiscientific explanations.

That matter aside, what are these “supersitions” of which Mr. Dennett stands accused? Of the supposed “anthology”, Wieseltier elaborates only on one, and that one only in a trite manner. Near the end of his review he tells us that *Breaking the Spell* “is riddled with translations of emotions and ideas into evo[lutionary] psychobabble.” He is referring to Dennett’s comments about the biological foundations of human social customs of courtship, marriage, and mourning. With this verbal slapshot, Wieseltier attempts to brush off an entirely new field of scientific inquiry. Evolutionary psychology actually attempts to make use of the modern Darwinian conception of evolution to explain the natural bases that underlie complex forms of social behavior and thinking among animals, including humans. It does not attempt to erase the insights of psychology and reduce, in a crude manner, all thought processes to simple biological signals. But for Wieseltier, this field can be cast aside as mere “babble.”

In other parts of the review Wieseltier makes a caricature of Dennett’s positions in order to lampoon them rather than have to argue against them. A few examples will give the flavor of his approach. First, there are the artificial dichotomies that Wieseltier puts into Dennett’s mouth, like: “Dennett lives in a world where you must believe in the grossest biologism or in the grossest theism, in a purely naturalistic understanding of religion or in intelligent design, in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in 19th-century England or in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in the sky.”

Because Dennett refers in one place to non-religious values of importance to atheists like democracy, life, love, justice, etc., Wieseltier feels it reasonable to conclude that “If you refuse his ‘impeccably hardheaded and rational ontology,’ then your sacred values must be tyranny, injustice, death, hatred and falsehood.” This sort of juvenile verbal tricksterism is one of the favored methods of right-wing editorialists in the US.

In a gratuitous and disingenuous afterthought, Wieseltier adds that “Dennett is the sort of rationalist who gives reason a bad name, and in a new era of American obscurantism, this is not helpful.” In a piece that is essentially dedicated to the defense of religion from science, Wieseltier wants to present himself as a defender of “reason” against “obscurantism”! This is rather like the exponents of “intelligent design” campaigning against the supposedly close-minded evolutionists who refuse to go along with “teaching the controversy.”

Wieseltier’s defense of religion becomes more explicit as his argument unfolds. “It will be plain that Dennett’s approach to religion is contrived to evade religion’s substance. He thinks that an inquiry into belief is made superfluous by an inquiry into the belief in belief. This is a very revealing mistake. You cannot disprove a belief unless you disprove its content.”

When Dennett speaks of “belief in belief,” however, he refers to the widespread acceptance of religion by those who may not believe in the divine, but rather believe that they should believe in it. Dennett is also suggesting an inquiry into this phenomenon. Why do so many people feel that they must pay homage to religious belief even when they are actually rather skeptical at heart?

More fundamentally, Dennett’s essential point about “belief in belief” is evaded by Wieseltier. For Dennett, it is not so much a matter of proving religious notions incorrect; that has already been done. The type of inquiry that Dennett proposes is necessary, above all, because religious belief has long outlived the rational disproving of all of the claims that it has made about the universe. Is further scientific proof needed to show that miracles do not take place, that human beings do not rise from the dead, that evil spirits do not cause illness, or that man evolved from less complex animals? Dennett is arguing that instead of focusing on these questions, it is high time for science to uncover the reasons for the persistence of belief *after rational disproof*. Does it survive only in a parasitic capability as a sort of mind-virus? Does it confer as-yet unknown benefits to human beings? Dennett says that these (and other related questions) have not been fully investigated.

Wieseltier repeatedly attempts to make Dennett’s argument crude and simplistic. For example, Wieseltier elaborates on his objection to evolutionary psychology by saying: “[I]t is very hard to envision the biological utilities of such gratuitous outlays as ‘The Embarkation for Cythera’ and Fermat’s theorem and the ‘Missa Solemnis.’” He says this as though biology only explained physiological functions, like the utility of respiration or eyesight. In fact, quite elaborate explanations for the biological utility of artistic (and scientific) capabilities have been offered by contemporary biologists and philosophers of science. These theories draw not only upon the mechanisms of natural selection, but also of sexual selection.

Moreover, the claim that science cannot comprehend the complexities of the intellectual or the emotional sides of human life is belied by the development of neuroscience in particular during the most recent decades. Though much of the published research is highly specialized, a number of new works are aimed at the general public. Of these, a particularly noteworthy book, which directly refutes much of Wieseltier’s argument, is Antonio Damasio’s *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. Though Damasio concentrates on the emotional side of the human brain, much of his argument can also be adapted to mental processes that we take to be largely intellectual.

Damasio is the head of the neurology department at the University of Iowa Medical Center. In his book, he draws attention to the complex manner in which changes in the neural architecture of different regions of the brain give rise to emotion and particular senses of pain or pleasure associated with them. Though we cannot fully do justice to his book in this space, it will suffice to quote from one of his conclusions to see how far from crude reductionism is a genuinely materialist conception. “The gist of my current view,” Damasio writes, “is that feelings are the expression of human flourishing or human distress, as they occur in mind and body. Feelings are not a mere decoration added to the emotions, something that one might keep or discard. Feelings can be and often are *revelations* of the state of life within the entire organism—a lifting of the veil in the literal sense of the term [p.6, emphasis in original].” Damasio traces the evolutionary origins of feelings to the very simple, unconscious reflexes of basic organisms. Over eons, collections of simple reflexes became behaviors, collections of behaviors were transformed into drives, and assemblies of drives became emotions. Feelings are placed by Damasio at the apex of this evolutionary pyramid.

This development happened not in a single organism but in the evolution of animal life as a whole. Feelings are found in only the most complex of animals. By delving into the neural details of the brain,

Damasio is able to show how an elaborate system of more basic decision-making structures is able to yield the emotional richness of human experience.

Wieseltier does no better in considering the philosophical heritage drawn upon by Dennett than he does the biological. Wieseltier is highly disingenuous in the portion of his review dealing with the philosophical legacy of David Hume. (Dennett acknowledges his intellectual debt to Hume, whose 1757 pamphlet “The Natural History of Religion” served as one of the inspirations for *Breaking the Spell*). According to Wieseltier, Dennett is simply being duplicitous in claiming some sort of Humean legacy. Wieseltier chooses to ignore the more philosophically radical elements in Hume’s pamphlet and other writings on religion. He takes instead one sentence from the preface of the Hume’s pamphlet which avows theism in the form of an “intelligent author” of nature. Even if Hume rejected religious ministrations and, while dying “deplored religion as a source of illusions and crimes,” “his God was still a god and so his theism is as true or false as any other theism,” says Wieseltier.

This claim is both crude and sloppy. Different theisms differ radically, agreeing only that one or more gods exist. Wieseltier’s argument makes an amalgam of Hume’s philosophy of religion and that of very different traditions. In reality, Hume staked out a very radical position; it is simply impossible to read *The Natural History of Religion* and think of it as merely another form of theism. Hume posits a God that embodies the remarkable beauty of the natural laws that had been discovered during the Enlightenment, particularly Newton’s mechanics.

Of course, Hume was writing a century before Darwin and two centuries before the neo-Darwinian synthesis in biology. After Hume’s death, science was able to provide a compelling *natural* explanation for the development of the material world and of life on Earth. Hume’s conception could not transcend the historical limitations that were imposed upon him.

Dennett is more interested in the manner in which Hume pointed to the value of a comparative study of religion rather than the specific conclusions that he drew from his preliminary inquiry into the matter. Dennett points to Hume the investigator, hostile to the official creeds of his time and eager to make a fresh examination of the historical development of religion.

Wieseltier argues that Dennett is simply appealing to Hume’s authority in order to avoid taking on religion directly. “The truth of a religion,” he says, “cannot be proved by showing that a skeptic was in his way a believer, or by any other appeal to authority. There is no intellectually honorable surrogate for rational argument.” By this he attempts to impute to Dennett intellectual dishonesty for allegedly dodging an issue of major controversy, as though religion relied on “rational argument” for its present standing.

Particularly startling are Wieseltier’s conclusions about Dennett’s citations of Hume. Dennett’s “misrepresentation” of Hume (and, allegedly, of William James and Thomas Nagel) “illustrates his complacent refusal to acknowledge the dense and vital relations between religion and reason, not only historically but also philosophically.” Here is real obscurantism! The actual relation between religion and reason is, of course, a generally hostile one. As human society and philosophy developed, reason came into ever-greater conflict with religion. During and after the Enlightenment, a secure place for religion within philosophy was sought, but only by isolating it increasingly from the scrutiny of reason. To believe Wieseltier, however, one would have to conclude that reason depended for its very existence on religion!

For Wieseltier, the methods of science have no place in studying religion; an investigative project such as Dennett proposes is inherently invalid. This objection is largely unstated in the review, but it can be inferred not only from the citations above but also from the fact that Wieseltier never explains that the central purpose of Dennett’s book, in

the words of the author, is to propose a serious and systematic study of religion using the methods of modern social and natural science. Here is what Dennett actually says:

“It is high time that we subject religion as a global phenomenon to the most intensive interdisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet. Why? Because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about. It affects not just our social, political and economical conflicts, but the very meanings we find in our lives. For many people, probably a majority of people on Earth, nothing matters more than religion. For this very reason, it is imperative that we learn as much about it as we can. That, in a nutshell, is the argument of this book.”

Whatever the limitations of the methodology used by Dennett in the book—and the chief one is an insufficient appreciation of *social stratification* in the development and maintenance of religious belief—the project he proposes is entirely legitimate and timely. His naturalistic theory of religion’s propagation, inspired by Hume and James but drawing heavily on analogies suggested by modern biology may have its defects, but Dennett is not arguing that his ought to be the final theory of religion, but instead merely that it serve as a starting point for more systematic theoretical work by “the best minds on the planet.” Whatever its flaws, Dennett’s present theory is certainly not, as Wieseltier suggests, “just an extravagant speculation based on his hope for what is the case, a pious account of his own atheistic longing.”

And what of Wieseltier’s “longings”? They are revealed in statements like, “There are concepts in many of the fables of faith, philosophical propositions about the nature of the universe. They may be right or they may be wrong, but they are there.” Humanity is, therefore, indebted to religion for these “philosophical prepositions,” which Wieseltier does not care to enumerate and which, by his own admission, may not even be true. Dennett, of course, does not deny that concepts about the nature of the universe are to be found in religion. Unlike Wieseltier, however, he believes that the veracity of these concepts is determined by their correspondence to reality. He asks whether they stand up to scientific scrutiny. And the central idea of Dennett’s book is that the methods of science should be used to evaluate the veracity of these concepts and, most importantly, to uncover the reasons that they have found such wide reception in the course of human history.

Wieseltier claims that science cannot understand the products of human culture. But he carefully avoids asking the related question: what does religion understand about their production? Nor does he ask: What facts has religion uncovered about emotional life? And how do its conclusions compare with those drawn scientifically?

Wieseltier’s review, as well as the decision of the *New York Times Book Review* to publish it, mark another milestone in the backsliding of what once constituted the liberal intelligentsia in the United States. These once-liberal elites are increasingly at pains to try to find an accommodation with the religious right and avoid positions that might antagonize it. By proposing a detailed study of religion by science, Dennett has committed an unpardonable sin in the eyes of these select few: he threatens to expose the nature of the hold that religion maintains over political life. For this reason the *New York Times Book Review* elected to prejudice public opinion against *Breaking the Spell* in hopes that the book will fail to find a broad readership. This simply reflects the fact that for definite social reasons, the entire political establishment in the US is committed to ensuring that the “spell,” to which Dennett draws attention in his book, remains unbroken.

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