

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York: Penguin Group 2006, XVI + 448 pp.

In this book, Dennett argues that the best way to understand religion is to explore it as a natural phenomenon. This means that religion is accessible to natural sciences, like the evolutionary history of religion, evolutionary biology, genetics, bio-informatics, neuroscience, and sociobiology. Only the scientific attitude enables true inquiry into religion and only scientific methods allow us to understand religion correctly. According to Dennett religious ideas are created by human minds, and are simple biological facts. But at the same time, religion is also a global phenomenon: it guides us and gives meaning to our lives by telling us what we ought to do. Besides, religion plays a very important role in our social, economic, and political world. This is another reason why we have to know as well as possible what religion is today, and what religion will be in the future.

Dennett divides his book into three parts, and appendixes for more professional readers. In the first part of the book Dennett proposes his definition of religion. For him „the core phenomenon of religion is that it 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 definition excludes the understanding of religion as an individual, private, and spiritual experience. Against this, Dennett argues that religion as a natural phenomenon has to be socially experienced, because it is a product of human evolution. Like other human inventions, religion has to become a proper object of scientific study.

One of the most well known naturalists – the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould – defended a few years ago the view that science and religion are two „non-overlapping magisteria”, two domains of inquiry that can coexist peacefully: science is concerned with factual truths and religion is concerned with the realm of morality and the meaning of life. Dennett presents a different approach. He acknowledges that natural science can and should study religion scientifically. But he never explains why he thinks that science is the best tool to describe religion, nor does he show that we can understand all aspects of religion when we explore it as a natural phenomenon. He simply accepts the naturalistic approach as a new dogma. For him, religion is invented by human beings. It is a natural phenomenon, like music or other artifacts, as opposed to supernatural events, like miracles. He has completely ignored all those scientists (J. Polkinghorne, A. Peacocke, L. Gilkey,

S. Jaki, the intelligent design followers) who point out that in the attempt to understand religion the naturalistic perspective is less important than philosophical and theological ones.

In the second part of the book entitled *The Roots of Religion* Dennett describes religion from the evolutionary history of religion. He argues that religion emerged just as human languages emerged by independent processes of biological and cultural evolution. The roots of human beliefs and practices lie in instinct and are deeply rooted in human biology. So every religion has three purposes or claims: 1) to comfort us in our suffering and allay our fear of death; 2) to explain things we can't otherwise explain; 3) to encourage group cooperation in the face of trials and enemies (p. 103). People need religion because they need to be together in community for mutual protection, security, and economic cooperation. In order to explain these three purposes we have to first understand the evolution of the human mind, because finally religion is a by-product of our mind's endowment. The evolution of religion proceeded from folk and naïve religion to the organized religion of civilized man, in much the same way as folk music transformed into professional music. The human instinct forces organized religion into complicated institutional form, which makes easier the protection, security and cooperation of human animals. But in modern times science brings it about that the traditional lore about God ceases to be worthy of belief. For many people God is a mere intentional object like Santa Claus, Sherlock Holmes, or the Loch Ness Monster. Central tenets of faith lose their sense, and belief in God is replaced by belief in belief in God. This process of transformation is a natural process of evolutionary biology. Someone, who believes in God is sure that God exists, but someone who believes in belief in God is sure that belief in God exists. People need to believe in something, because it is a powerful and most wonderful state of mind. However, there is a clear empirical difference between these two states of mind: to believe in God and to believe in belief in God.

But even if religion is an untruth, we have to ask the question whether human religion does more good than harm? Dennett quotes Voltaire: „If God did not exist, it would be necessary for us to invent Him” (p. 240). But he doesn't agree with this quotation and believes that religion is a dangerous phenomenon. The spell of religion should be broken and we have to protect people from it. First of all we have to ask: is it intelligible to think today that the best way to live a good life is through religion? Or more precisely: is religion really good for people?

Dennett answers all these questions in the third part of his book. Most of his discussion is an attempt to provide arguments to show why religion isn't a support to morality and doesn't promise an infinite reward in heaven. For him human life isn't meaningful when religion is a fraud, because people need to build the meaning of their life on truth, and not on illusion. He also critiques the opinion that religion is the bulwark of morality. Religion, no longer plays its most important role in saying us what we ought to do and giving us a tenable reason to do good. We no longer need God the Policeman or Big Brother in order to do good things and

keep promises. Also the idea of heavenly reward doesn't motivate people and isn't the only or the best inspirational theme in religious doctrine today. Of course some people accept that religion still give us a sense of the sanctity of human life, and shows that every human life is equally sacred, inviolable, and infinitely valuable. This value protects our lives from abuse by modern technology, medicine, science, and politics. But religious values also create groups of violent fanatics, abortion-clinic bombings, terrorists, and extremists without responsibility. But, if this is so, then for purposes of charity and the distribution of help, Dennett prefers secular organizations, humanistic, political and governmental programs rather than religious and church channels.

Dennett worries about the most extreme and deviant forms of religion, such as that of the Al Qaeda fundamentalists. Finally his critique of religion is political and ideological. He has very little to say about the arguments for the existence of God. He devotes only six pages to discussing them. The Ontological Argument is for him „intellectual conjuring tricks or puzzles rather than serious scientific proposals” (p. 241). The Cosmological Argument, which states that a self-caused God is the cause of the universe, is false today, because quantum physics teaches us that some phenomena don't need a cause. Or, if we prefer to accept the premise of the argument, we can also choose to accept that the universe as a whole is self-caused. For Dennett the most intuitive and popular argument is the Argument from Design, and its new version – The Anthropic Principle Argument. This argument holds that the laws of physics are „fine tuned” by some Intelligent Designer, who is responsible for the process of the evolution of the universe. Against this, he argues that in attempting to understand the process of evolution there are enough reasons to explain everything in nature as the result of „accidents”. For Dennett the most important question is why people believe in God despite the fact that they don't have strong rational arguments. He discusses the importance of the religious belief in the belief in God as a psychological and moral necessity, which gives a meaning to life and protects believers from anarchy and chaos.

However one can still think that religion, first of all, is a supernatural phenomenon, which should be correctly understand by philosophical and theological inquiry. As an atheist, Dennett never admits such a possibility, but his naturalistic point of view isn't persuasively justified. He describes himself as a bright (p. 21) – a new term, which means a nonbeliever of a new type. Very often he seems to feel in his book as if he has enlightened poor believers and broken a taboo of traditional religion. He wants to help religious people to understand that religion is an illusion, because „this is something that they themselves should want to know” (p. 17). He is sure the world would be a much better place if all religions became extinct. But Dennett also has a religion and accepts sacred values. These values are democracy, freedom, justice, life, love, trust, peace. He believes that in a multicultural society we have to draw our children away from religious ignorance and educate them in more universal values. That's why the spell of traditional religion should be broken

and replaced by a new religion of modern democracy. I found Dennett's favored approach to these problems to be inadequate. Although his explanation quickly identifies the main critique of religion with the value of democracy, he forgets that in the name of science he proposes a new ideology. If he would be an open-minded philosopher, he would have to ask himself critically what supports those values and how to examine them, as a natural phenomena, by scientific methods. Nevertheless, this is a long, provocative, and very well written book, and its arguments are detailed. It certainly should be read with care by anyone professionally concerned with religion.

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Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, X + 193 pp.

The question of the nature of the relationship between God and morality is one of the most interesting and difficult. Erik J. Wielenberg's book is an attempt to illuminate the contemporary debate concerning that relation from the perspective of naturalism of certain kind. Instead of arguing for the truth of naturalism, he proposes for us to suppose that it is true, and to search for and examine implications, mainly of the ethical sort, that his conditional project has for the meaning of human life, morality, value and virtue. The partial aim of the book is to respond to arguments made by some Christian philosophers seeking to refute naturalism by pointing to its supposedly unacceptable ethical consequences.

The central component of Wielenberg's naturalism is the negative claim, that „no supernatural entities exist, nor (...) existed in the past, nor will they in the future”. Putting this in other words, there is no God, no immortal soul and we came into being solely through a combination of chance and necessity. Our beginning is not the work of Providence, nor is it a result of the operation of intelligent design, and our death marks the permanent end of our conscious life, by which Wielenberg means, I suppose, the end of any kind of human life. There is no afterlife, and no reincarnation. His naturalism is of an ontological kind, not epistemological or methodological. He does not endorse the claim that all facts are scientific, because, as he states it, his version of naturalism leaves open the possibility that there are ethical facts that are not reducible to scientific or physical facts.

The book has five chapters, apart from the important introduction, references and index. The first chapter defends the view that human life can be meaningful even if God does not exist. The second is an examination of two different divine command theories, taken as the explanations or maybe the explications of the morality–God relationship. Chapter three is devoted to other aspects of that possible

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