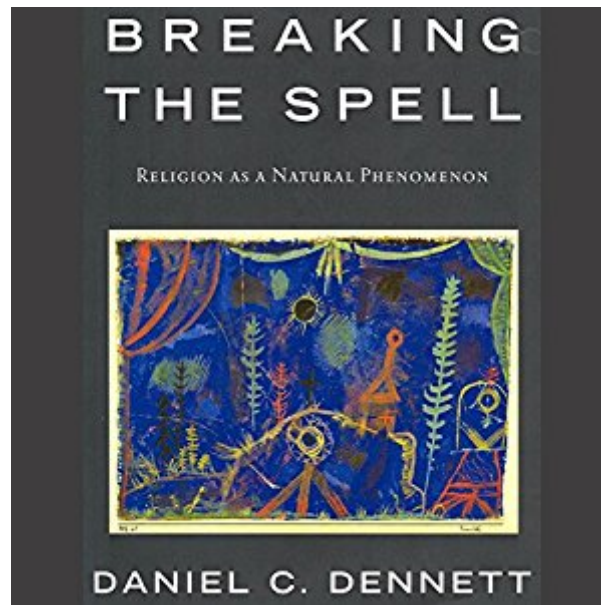


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Breaking The Spell: Religion As A Natural Phenomenon



Synopsis

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 creed but an unblinking look beneath the veil of orthodoxy, *Breaking the Spell* will be read and debated by believers and skeptics alike.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Dan Dennett essentially plays Toto in "The Wizard of Oz," by peeling back the curtain on the well-meaning but tricky wizard to reveal the embarrassing secret of his power. The wizard exploits human nature in the attempt to help people, similarly to the doctor who knowingly uses placebo treatments when he feels they are the best option. Dennett doesn't assume by any means that we knowingly exploit each other through religion, he also explores the question of how features of human biology might be utilized by human culture through a historical process not specifically guided by human will. The character that does the unmasking is undoubtedly unpopular, which is why it was given to Toto rather than to innocent Dorothy or other likeable humanoid characters. Any surprise that a liberal university professor, professional philosopher, and outspoken atheist should take on the unmasking role? Neither the sort of academic qualifications Dennett holds nor the theme of piercing the protective veil which enshrines religious belief is anything entirely new in the

literature analyzing religion. What is new is the improvement of the tools for accomplishing the task and the improvement of the sort of questions we can ask. Dennett deftly and accessibly reviews the primary themes from a wealth of psychological, anthropological, and biological literature and along the way offers his own interpretation of each theme and identifies the directions he thinks future research should take. As a result, this is a book that asks more questions than it answers. Its primary goal is to pull back the curtain of mystery with which we have enshrined religious belief, not to suggest final answers to all of the serious questions raised.

Religion is commonly believed to be a stabilizing influence in any society - but is it really? "Why not subject it to scientific scrutiny?" asks Daniel Dennett, director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. "Maybe it is just another bad habit." History has shown that science - despite wrong turns, egos, politics, jealousy, ambition - has a consistent record of being more correct than any other method of inquiry. Just ask anyone who bets their life on science every time they board a commercial airliner. Unique to religion, a theology's taboo against self-examination is brilliant. Guaranteed to cause controversy, Dennett addresses this issue and presents a plan. Dennett surveys various theories of religion: From Scott Atran - Religion is (1) a community's costly and hard-to-fake commitment (2) to a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agent(s) (3) who master peoples' existential anxieties, such as death and deception (4) leading to ritualistic and rhythmic co-ordination of 1, 2, and 3; such as communion. This tendency to invent a supernatural agency is an evolutionary by-product - which involves exaggerated use of everyday cognitive processes - to produce unreal worlds that easily attract attention, are readily memorable, and are subject to cultural transmission, selection, and survival. Add a few hopeful solutions to the problems involving the tragedies of life, and you get religion. From Pascal Boyer - Every religion has these common features: (1) A supernatural agent who takes a specific ontologic form (animal, tree, human, etc.) (2) There is something memorably different about this agent (the animal talks, the tree records conversation, the human is born of a virgin) which is an ontologic violation.

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