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Now What Do We Do?1. The urgent question isn't whether religion provokes warlike behaviour. Patience and politicsAppendixesA. Just as being drunk while committing a crime is not a defence, he says, "religious intoxication is no excuse either," and moderates who fail to condemn extremists are "complicit" in the actions of the latter. That they are unlikely to do so is for the very same reason that he can get away with skating over the theological arguments for and against the existence of God - the practice of most people's faith is not open to such forensic examination. The Bellboy and the Lady Named TuckD. Rather than a genuine hotline to God, many of them, he claims, have a "belief in belief", wherein the content of the second belief is at best hazy. "An important task for religious people of all faiths in the 21st century will be spreading the conviction that there are no acts more dishonourable than harming 'infidels' of one stripe or another for 'disrespecting' a flag, a cross, a holy text," he says, writing presciently before the Danish cartoon controversy. Then he starts laying down the law. Beliefs designed to be professed6. The New Replicators?B. That, in a nutshell, is the argument of this book." Breaking the Spell, however, has already provoked a very unreasonable response. . Mitt Romney, the Republican governor of Massachusetts, and a serious presidential candidate, is a Mormon. He understands that modern religions derive their coherence precisely from the fact that a creed is a statement of belonging as much as of belief. So he doesn't skirt the complications of the rising about religion: he sees the difficulties, marches bravely into the swamp and there - about half way through the book, at exactly the point where we're wondering how to reach firm ground - he stops, inflates a hot air balloon that's labelled "memes", climbs into it and floats away. Memes are familiar to readers of Dennett's earlier work. The academic smoke screen3. If we look at Governor Romney's Mormon beliefs, they are essentially a way of marking what tribe he belongs to. They are ideas, words, tunes, strategies, catchphrases - anything that people can copy, or appear to copy, from one another. It is whether warlike behaviour benefits those who carry it out, for if it does, religions will surely find ways to justify it. Few of us in this culture are in favour of fanaticism; but it is obviously possible to be a fanatical atheist, so it turns out to be fanaticism that's the problem, not religion. Dennett sees that their status is more complicated and interesting than that. But Dennett sees that religious feelings are modified by the social structures in which they are expressed and that there is an important difference between believing in a crocodile god who lives under the mountain five miles away and subscribing to the doctrine of the Trinity. A working definition of religion3. A simple psychological account won't do, any more than psychology can explain economics or sociology; psychology may explain how we will react to our social environments, but it can't explain or predict how these environments will arise. Another great advantage to Dennett's book is that he sees that religious belief is not really propositional. Breaking the Spell: Religion As a Natural Phenomenon by Daniel Dennett 450pp. Penguin, £25It is hard being an atheist with a sense of proportion. Shamans as hypnotists5. Might music be bad for you?4. Acknowledging that it is commonly held that humans have a yearning for something beyond the material and explainable, he raises the question of whether we have a "god centre" in the brain that developed for evolutionary reasons. He traces the pathways of religion from animism, a leftover remnant of which he amusingly suggests is evident when we shout at a computer or some other complicated device, thereby implying that the object is an intentional being, through shamanism, folk religion and finally to organised religion. Here he raises interesting research which looks at an economic model of contesting religious ideas. The next president of the US could be a man who believes that America was peopled by one of the lost tribes of Israel and visited Can science study religion?2. The invention of Team Spirit1. Belief in Belief1. Religions which require more, or are more "costly", yield greater value, thus explaining the appeal of born-again Christian groups and fundamentalist Islam. Lessons from Lebanon: the strange cases of the Druze and Kim Philby7. Breaking Which Spell?1. To brook or not to brook4. "Whatever religion is as a human phenomenon," says Dennett, "it is a hugely costly endeavour, and evolutionary biology shows that nothing so costly just happens." He does not say, as some have already inaccurately accused him of doing, that this meme has to act as a malign virus. Thus they are essential to warlike societies as much as to peaceful ones. Memory-engineering devices in oral cultures6. Those who fail so to question, he says, are "excusing themselves from the moral conversation, inadvertently acknowledging that their own views are not conscientiously maintained and deserve no further hearing". He reveals his real standpoint at the end. In his preface, Dennett remarks that every foreign reader who saw drafts of the book complained of its American bias. For the love of God2. It's for this reason, too, that he can get away with dismissing the traditional arguments about the existence of God, because for most Christians they play no part in their beliefs. The ant colony and the corporation3. "The more you have invested in your religion, the more you will be motivated to protect that investment," he writes. Kim Philby as a Real Case of Indeterminacy of Radical InterpretationNotesBibliographyIndex The stated aims of his new book are also eminently reasonable: "For many people, nothing matters more than religion. The anthropologists Pascal Boyer and Scott Atran have both written interestingly on the subject, and Dennett summarises and credits their work in a way that should do more to promote it. Dennett understands there are vast differences between primitive or animist religions and the sophisticated beliefs of a modern Jesuit. Why does it matter what you believe?4. What can we say about sacred values?4. Folk religion as practical know-how3. Asking what pays for religion?4. Thus, Daniel Dennett writes early in this book: "I for one am not in awe of your faith. Does religion make us moral?2. a sharp synthesis of a library of evolutionary, anthropological and psychological research on the origin and spread of religion." -Scientific American National Book Circle Awards WINNER Breaking The SpellPrefacePART I: OPENING PANDORA'S BOX1. God as intentional object3. Toxic memes5. Morality and Religion1. He compares "true religion" to falling in love; those who feel it "just know". The music of religion2. You better believe it2. For all the rhetoric about the wickedness of religious belief, I don't think Dennett takes this idea very seriously. Religions are one of the ways in which humans understand and create their own societies. I am appalled by your arrogance, by your unreasoning certainty that you have all the answers" - and he's not talking about Richard Dawkins. What's going on?2. But that may have been a 19th-century aberration, like the belief that the enlightenment must spread simply because our beliefs are true. Andrew Brown's in The Beginning Was the Worm is published by Simon & Schuster. Given that many Christians today still have an anthropomorphised idea of God - the one who might look like Dennett - which modern theology cannot sustain, he's right to make this distinction. Creeping reflection and the birth of secrecy in religion4. So, after the preliminary pep-talk to the choir, he gives a very forceful and lucid account of the reasons why we need to study religious behaviour as a human phenomenon: apparently this programme comes as a tremendous shock to those Americans who have never heard of Hume, William James, or even Terry Pratchett. This is followed by an excellent and clear summary of the state of some new-ish scientific research into the psychology of religious belief. A path paved with good intentions2. The raw materials of religion3. People like Dennett and Dawkins, who pride themselves on their tough-minded, ruthless, reductionist approach to biology, never seem to apply this kind of reasoning to human society. Should science study religion?3. Toward a Buyer's Guide to Religions1. Would neglect be more benign?3. A God you can talk to8. The Roots of Religion1. Religion as a natural phenomenon2. The lowest common denominator?5. Just a theory?2. The domestication of religions? . Some Questions About Science1. More profoundly, a scientific or evolutionary analysis of fanaticism might ask what use it was to fanatics and the answer is clearly that sometimes it was very useful indeed - at least to their surviving relatives and to their tribe. If you want to naturalise religion, as Dennett does, and to show that it is a human activity arising from the normal workings of nature, then you need to discover what parts of our evolved human nature it appeals to. Bringing out the best2. This may be difficult for us to see because the myth we learnt was that fanaticism was a substitute for high technology. Richard Dawkins might regard Romney's professed beliefs as evidence of simple insanity. No one in this country will persecute you and it's not really very hard to disbelieve in God, but the temptation to strike attitudes in front of the universe persists, even in people who are about to spend 450 pages arguing that the universe is not the sort of thing that might be impressed. Dennett's diligent and reasonable enquiry may not, sadly, have much effect on the unreasonable. The division of doxastic labor4. "Ambitious . Fanatics were the guys galloping towards the machine guns while reasoned, logical, scientific people sat behind the machine guns and calmly mowed them down. an accessible account of what might be called the natural history of religion." -The New Yorker" How would a visitor from Mars dispassionately explain human religion? It's been called "insidious", a "prejudiced" attack on religion in which the Tufts University professor "betrays his academic standards"; and his casual dismissal of the standard Christian arguments for the existence of God has been labelled "amazing". In his mild-mannered way, Dennett admits that he expects to be attacked; and so far his contention, that to some people, the very act of holding values they believe to be sacred up to the light of enquiry is in itself offensive, seems to have been born out. What Dennett actually does is to look at religion as a cultural replicator, or a "meme", to use the term coined by his friend Richard Dawkins. In that very important sense, they are arbitrary signifiers, like words. And, if you're really trying to produce a naturalistic account of religion, "memes" distract from the worrying and frightening questions. What can your religion do for you?10. Questioning is for the sacerdotal caste, not the followers; and the priests are content to leave it that way, for the final object of their contemplation cannot be adequately described in words. Thus far, despite the protests of those who wish to take offence at the occasional levity of tone, Dennett is largely non-judgmental about religion. How Nature deals with the problem of other minds5. What percentage of a Sunday congregation could explain the Ontological Argument, for instance, or argue against Dennett's mischievous suggestion that you might use it to prove the existence of the most perfect ice-cream sundae conceivable - "since if it didn't exist there would be a more perfect conceivable one, namely one that did exist!" This convincing conclusion is that religion does not depend on a uniformity of belief, but on a uniformity of profession. The danger here, he says, lies in the sacred becoming too sacred. "If you have to hoodwink your children to ensure that they confirm their faith when they are adults, your faith ought to go extinct." Those of faith are under an obligation to examine their beliefs scientifically, rationally and philosophically, says Dennett. In the third part of his book, "Religion Today", he argues that the mostly unquestioning faith possessed by the majority of believers might not be so consequence-neutral after all. Some More Questions About ScienceC. Religion, the Early Days1. His defence is that it is aimed at an American audience, since it is American fundamentalism that most threatens what he values about his own society. In every case where the word is used, it can be replaced by one of these other terms with a corresponding gain in precision and explanatory power. Cui bono?3. Curious about people's devotion to it, perhaps, but not actively rude. The births of religions2. There is in fact quite a lot of psychological research into our capacity to believe in ghosts, spirits and other things for which there is no experimental warrant. Is religion what gives meaning to your life?3. Getting the gods to speak to us4. Some avenues to explore: how can we home in on religious conviction?3. A Martian's list of theoriesPART II: THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION4. Why should we expect religions to behave for the benefit of professors in Cambridge or Oxford, or even for the benefit of humanity? If we are going to be atheists, and to regard religions as human constructions serving human ends, we should not shrink from the idea that these ends are likely to be sometimes inimical to other humans outside the group. Does God exist?PART III: RELIGION TODAY9. What shall we tell the children?4.

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