

The Spell of the Meme

Alister McGrath

Professor of Historical Theology, Oxford University

A speech given at the Royal Society of Arts on Monday 13 March 2006, in response to Professor Daniel Dennett's book *Breaking the Spell*.

I would like to begin by thanking Professor Dennett for writing a very interesting book, which I am sure will generate much debate. He writes well and engagingly, and has a nice sense of humour. I cannot hope to engage with the entire contents of the book, so I will just have to look at some of its aspects that I believe are particularly important. To begin with, I would like to set the context to the points I am going to make.

Why hasn't religion died out? A few months back, the World Congress of the International Academy of Humanism took place in upstate New York. Its organizers had no doubt of the urgency of their theme. Religion is regaining the ascendancy. Humanity is facing a new dark ages! Speakers such as Richard Dawkins, Britain's best-known atheist, tried to work out how to get rid of the "God Delusion" – one of the many barriers that need to be swept away if humanity is to finally come of age.

It's a fascinating glimpse of the crisis of confidence which is gripping atheism. As *Guardian* columnist Madeleine Bunting pointed out,¹

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,1681235,00.html>

when commenting on Richard Dawkins' recent TV programme on Channel 4, it shows a deep loss of faith among atheists:

Behind unsubstantiated assertions, sweeping generalisations and random anecdotal evidence, there's the unmistakable whiff of panic; they fear religion is on the march again.

You can see what Madeleine Bunting means. Belief in God was meant to have died out years ago. When I was an atheist, back in the late 1960s, everything seemed so simple. A bright new dawn lay just around the corner. Religion would be relegated to the past, a grim and dusty relic of a bygone age. God was just a cosy illusion for losers, best left to very inadequate and sad people. It was just a matter of waiting for nature to take its course. I was in good company in believing this sort of thing. It was the smug, foolish and fashionable wisdom of the age. Like flared jeans, it was accepted enthusiastically, if just a little uncritically.

I arrived at Oxford from school a Marxist, believing that religion was the cause of all the world's evils. As an intellectual Darwinian, it seemed perfectly clear to me that the idea of God was on its way out, and would be replaced by fitter and more adapted ideas – like Marxism. I was a "bright", to use Professor Dennett's language.

But it didn't work out like that. At Oxford – to my surprise – I discovered Christianity. It was the intellectually most exhilarating and spiritually stimulating thing I could ever hope to describe – better even than chemistry, a wonderful subject which I had thought to be the love of my life and my future career. I went on to gain a doctorate for research in molecular biophysics from Oxford, and found that immensely exciting and satisfying. But I knew I had found something better – like the pearl of great price that Jesus talks about in the gospel, which is so beautiful and precious that it

overshadows everything. It was intellectually satisfying, imaginatively engaging, and aesthetically exciting.

But this raised questions for me. I had been taught that science disproved God. That all good scientists were atheists. That science was good, religion evil. It was a hopelessly simplified binary opposition, not unlike George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*: Four legs good, two legs bad. But it suited me just fine then.

Yet my new-found Christian faith brought a new sense of fulfilment and appreciation to my studies and later my research in the natural sciences. I saw nature as charged with the grandeur and majesty of God. To engage with nature was to gain a deeper appreciation of the divine wisdom. I gave up the sciences to read theology, but I still love the sciences, and follow the literature, especially in evolutionary biology. And above all, I have a passion for relating Christian theology to the natural sciences. Hence my presence tonight.

The first point that got me nodding my head in agreement comes very early in the book. People sometimes feel very defensive about religion. Religious people often get extremely defensive when challenged about the basis of their beliefs, which hinders any serious debate about the nature of their faith. I know what he means. The issue, I suspect, is that a challenge to faith often threatens to pull the rug from under the values and beliefs that have sustained someone's life. But this is a general problem with any significant worldview, not just a religion.

I gave a lecture last year on the religious views of Richard Dawkins. It was pretty standard stuff. I simply demonstrated how Dawkins' atheism was not adequately grounded in argument or evidence, and

represented a highly skewed reading of the natural sciences. Yet afterwards I was confronted by a very angry man, who told me that I had destroyed his faith. His atheism rested on the authority of Richard Dawkins, and I had thrown his life into turmoil. Now part of me felt that this was just too bad, and he ought to be more critical about evaluating evidence. But another part of me noted that some beliefs – not all, but some – matter so much to us that we base our lives upon them. We all need to examine our beliefs – especially if we are naïve enough to think that we don't have any.

So how, I wondered, would Professor Dennett clarify the distinction between a worldview and a religion? The dividing line is notoriously imprecise, and, many would say, is constructed by those with vested interests to defend. Here I must confess some puzzlement. Professor Dennett tells us (p. 9) that “a religion without God or gods is like a vertebrate without a backbone”. Now if I were leading a sixth form discussion about how to define religion, this would be the first definition to be considered – and the first to be rejected, precisely because it is so inadequate. What about nontheistic religions? Vertebrates *by definition* have backbones. The concept of religion simply does not entail God.

So why this unworkable definition? I initially thought that it was because Professor Dennett seems to have American Protestant fundamentalism in his gunsights. (This is, if I might say so, a very American book.) After I had finished the book, I could see why he took this line. Dennett wants to explain religion in terms of evolutionary theory. The existence of God is, he asserts, a fantasy that once carried some kind of survival advantages. So religions that don't believe in God don't really fit the bill.

I have to say that I was simply not persuaded by his account of what religion is, which most religious people will regard as unrecognizable. Perhaps it tells us a lot about what leading figures in America's political and intellectual left think about religion, which is a rather different matter.

So let me turn now to what I think is the most interesting aspect of this book – its appeal to science. This is an area that excites me, and Professor Dennett's earlier book *Darwin's dangerous idea* shows that he has mastered some of the intellectual issues that he needs to address in this book. I would place Professor Dennett in the broad tradition of naturalist explanation of religion which includes Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. Whatever the benefits of religions, Dennett and these writers believe that they arise entirely inside human minds. No spiritual realities exist outside us. Natural explanations may be given of the origins of belief in God. Now I hesitate to mention this, but this is clearly a rather circular argument, which presupposes its conclusions.

So what models does Professor Dennett propose for the origins of faith in God? I was delighted to find a rich range of explanatory approaches in this book. I read the first – the "sweet tooth" theory. On this approach, just as we have evolved a receptor system for sweet things, so in a similar way we might have a "god centre" in our brains. Such a centre might depend on a "mystical gene" that was favoured by natural selection because people with it tend to survive better.

Just a moment, I thought. Where's the science? What's the evidence for this? Instead I found mights and maybes, speculation and supposition, instead of the rigorous evidence-driven and evidence-based arguments that I love and respect. These theories

are evidence-free and wildly speculative. We are told, for example, that – I quote from the jacket blurb – religious “ideas could have spread from individual superstitions via shamanism and the early ‘wild’ strains of religion”. There’s no credible evidence for this. There’s no serious attempt to engage with the history of religions. It reminds me of those TV ads; “this could help you lose weight as part of a calorie-controlled diet”. *Could*. The TV ad writers would love to be able to say their product was “clinically proven” to do these things. But they can’t. There’s no evidence.

Now I wish I had time to engage with each of the major models that I noted in working through this book. Sadly, I do not have time. I therefore propose to deal with what I consider to be the strongest of these models in detail. This is the “meme” – a hypothetical cultural or intellectual replicator. On this model, religions might be memes that infect our brains. They are not necessarily parasitic, but could be symbiotic, conferring advantages on those who are infected. It’s an idea that Professor Dennett put forward back in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, and needs exploration. So let’s do that.

Is belief in God a meme? It’s an idea that Richard Dawkins floated back in 1976, and it lingers to this day. When I first came across the idea of the meme back in 1977, I was excited by it. I was beginning my career as an intellectual historian, fascinated by cultural development and the history of ideas. I thought that Dawkins’ idea of the meme might explain some things far better than other models. And I know that others felt the same. Yet as I – and those others – began to check this idea out, we began to realize it just didn’t work.² I abandoned the concept as unworkable

² See Stephen Shennan, *Genes, memes and human history : Darwinian archaeology and cultural evolution*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

about ten years later, after detailed work on intellectual developments in the Renaissance.

But the real problems lie deeper than this. First, the meme is just an hypothesis – one that we don't need, as there are better models available – for example, in economics, but also in anthropology. If genes could not be seen, we would have to invent them – the evidence demands a biologically transmitted genetic replicator. *Memes can't be observed, and the evidence can be explained perfectly well without them.* As Maurice Bloch – professor of anthropology at LSE – commented recently, the “exasperated reaction of many anthropologists to the general idea of memes” reflects the apparent ignorance of the proponents of the meme-hypothesis of the discipline of anthropology, and its major successes in the explanation of cultural development – without feeling the need to develop anything like the idea of a “meme” at all.³

At this stage, the issue is simply whether memes exist, irrespective of their implications for religion. I say, and most active scientists say with me, that there is no evidence for these things. As Simon Conway Morris, professor of evolutionary palaeobiology at Cambridge, pointed out, memes seem to have no place in serious scientific reflection. “Memes are trivial, to be banished by simple mental exercises. In any wider context, they are hopelessly, if not hilariously, simplistic.”⁴

³ Maurice Bloch, “A Well-Disposed Social Anthropologist’s Problem with Memes.” In *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, edited by Robert Aunger, 189-203. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴ Simon Conway Morris, *Life’s Solution : Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 324.

I was slightly puzzled that the arguments of such leading critics of memetics were not identified and confronted, point by point. This book, in my view, makes a critique of religion dependent on a hypothetical, unobserved entity, which can be dispensed with in order to make sense of what we observe. Isn't that actually a core atheist critique of God – an unobserved hypothesis which can be dispensed with easily? If I were an atheist, I would want to drop this memetic approach, which merely weakens your case, and head back to the safer territory of Marxist dialectical reading of history, which is, in my view, much more intellectually rigorous and evidence-driven. But far be it for me, as a lapsed atheist, to tell those of you who still believe how to do your job.

Anyway, what do memes *do*? Professor Dennett tells us that they spread beliefs – like beliefs in God. So are *all* beliefs spread by memes? Or just the ones that anti-religious critics don't like? Is there a meme for atheism? Professor Dennett's "Simple Taxonomy" (p. 344) certainly suggests so. And since there is no compelling scientific evidence for these things, is there a meme for believing in memes?⁵

This is certainly a problem for the originator of this notion, Richard Dawkins. As many of you will know, Dawkins makes an unsuccessful attempt to evade the trap of self-referentiality by saying that his own ideas are different. God is caused by memes; atheism is not. Anyone familiar with intellectual history will spot the pattern immediately. My ideas are exempt from the general patterns I identify for other ideas, which allows me to explain them away. My fear is that Professor Dennett has fallen victim to this

⁵ Alan Costall, "The 'Meme' Meme." *Cultural Dynamics* 4 (1991): 321-35.

same weakness. So let me ask this question once more: is it just belief in God that is a meme? *Surely atheism is as well.*

Now I make this point because I debated Susan Blackmore, England's most able defender of the meme hypothesis today, on this point at the Oxford Union last month. We had a great time – and I put precisely this point to her. Her response was immediate and unequivocal: yes, atheism is a meme. So let me ask a question. *Is Dr Blackmore wrong when she affirms atheism is a meme?* If so, all viewpoints are affected in the same way, whether religious or anti-religious. Which, I would like to ask, is memetic orthodoxy and which heresy? If Dr Blackmore is right, the spell of atheism is transmitted in the same way as belief in God.

But my real question is this: how would Dr Blackmore and Professor Dennett be able to settle that point *scientifically*? If they are not able to do so, then we have a non-scientific debate about imaginary entities, hypothesised by analogy with the gene. And we all know how unreliable arguments based on analogy can be – witness the fruitless search for the luminiferous ether in the late nineteenth century, based on the supposed analogy between light and sound. It was analogically plausible – but nonexistent. The analogy was invalid. Richard Dawkins tells us that memes are merely awaiting their Crick and Watson; I think they are merely waiting for their Michelson and Morley.

Finally, I was glad to see that Professor Dennett and I share so much in common. We both love democracy, freedom, science, and lots of other things. We both also abhor violence and oppression. Professor Dennett argued that religion has on occasion encouraged both of those. I agree. That's a fact of history. Yet one of the things that I most regret about Professor Dennett's book is that it

excoriates religionists for their contributions to conflict and violence down the centuries – yet fails to note atheism’s failures in precisely those areas. I searched in vain for even a mention of Lenin or Stalin, each of whom launched violent programmes of repression based on their atheist worldviews against Christianity and Islam. That’s a fact of history as well.

Now Professor Dennett might respond by saying that these are not *typical* of atheism. I believe he would be right to do. But neither are the excesses of violence and intolerance that he does mention *typical* of religion. I appreciate the need for a bit of rhetoric and exaggeration to spice up an argument, but one cannot represent the *pathological* elements of any movement – religious or anti-religious – as if they were *normal* or *typical*. Few of us in this audience tonight are in favour of fanaticism; but it is clearly perfectly possible to be a fanatical atheist, as much as a fanatical religionist. It’s fanaticism that’s the problem, not religion or anti-religion. In Oxford, we are facing a threat from one of the most fanatical groups in British society today: animal rights protestors. They are not religious. They are driven by an ideology – by a worldview. Surely our common enemy is the fanatic, first and foremost. We need to reflect on how to control this phenomenon. But it is a clear factual error to assume that this is limited to, or necessarily characteristic of, religion.

I must end, and I do so by repeating my thanks to Professor Dennett for writing this book. I believe that it helps move the debate about the place of religion into a new and more helpful place, and look forward to our interaction on these themes.

END