

Daniel C. Dennett: Religion's just a survival meme

Daniel C. Dennett, director of Tufts University's Center for Cognitive Studies, stands up for his book

By Daniel C. Dennett
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In his critique of my recent book, [Breaking the Spell](#), Alister McGrath is pounding on an open door. Yes, of course, scientific ideas are memes and atheism is a meme. That's not the point. The point is not to criticize anything by calling it a meme. On the contrary, it is to provide an explanatory basis. So, of course, psychologist and memeticist Susan Blackmore was right to say that atheism is a meme.

How many of you readers think there are words? How many of you think that words are in your ontology? Do you believe in words, or are you not so sure that words exist? I think words exist, but if you think about them, they are extremely puzzling. What are they made of? They are not sounds. They're not made of ink.

It turns out that the concept of a word is abstract. They are so familiar to us that we don't tend to realize how strange words are as a category. If you believe in words then you believe in memes because words are memes that can be pronounced. Then there are memes that can't be pronounced, like fashions and other behaviors. And then there are large complexes of memes. The existence of memes is not in doubt at all. The importance of a theory of memetics is still to be debated.

Now, McGrath cites anthropologist Maurice Bloch and evolutionary paleo-biologist Simon Conway Morris, who have expressed their dislike of the concept of memes. Have I dealt with them? Yes. Are they serious critics? No. In particular, I think Bloch's animadversions against memes are thoughtful but distinctly answerable. My book has several appendices that deal with the objections to memes, and I think that there one finds good answers to the best criticisms by the anthropologist Dan Sperber and his colleagues, for instance.

McGrath says correctly that in my book he finds many speculative hypotheses and not much evidence. Well, there's some evidence — and I say very explicitly throughout the book that this is just a sketch of a theory so that you can see what it would be like to have a theory of religion as a natural phenomenon. I explicitly say that I don't claim to have proved any of this. The point of the book is to call for more research, including research that doesn't make use of the concept of memes.

The main importance of the concept of memes is precisely to get away from the otherwise extremely attractive position McGrath mentioned — that if religions have survived and are so dominant in human life, it must be because they aid our survival. Maybe, maybe not. They may aid our survival, or they may survive as unshakable habits. If you resist that hypothesis at the outset, you're not doing objective science. The way to find an objective standpoint from which to investigate the hypotheses is to acknowledge that cultural items

can spread whether or not they're good for us — graffiti, pornography, all sorts of dubious fashions. You don't have to suppose that they're good for us to look at them with an evolutionist's eye. Maybe some of the memes of religion are really good for us. That is an open question we can explore scientifically.

What about nontheistic religion?

McGrath cites my point that religion without God or gods is like a vertebrate without a backbone. I'm quite prepared to look at "vertebrates without backbones," to look at what might be called former religions. I just need a definition for the sake of argument, and I choose to include the presence of a belief in supernatural agents as key, as the core of my definition of a religion. I'm also quite prepared to look at other phenomena. I admit that, given that definition of a religion, there are a lot of things that call themselves religions today that aren't really religions.

Why do they call themselves religions? Well, for one thing, you can get wonderful tax breaks if you call yourself a religion.

Scientology wasn't called a religion at the outset. It's a religion now because it gets a great deal from the government by being a religion. It doesn't have any gods. Many people have, in effect, given up the supernatural agents — they're nontheistic — but they still want to cling to the prestige of calling this a religion.

There may be very good reasons for doing that, but let's not kid ourselves. That's not what religions used to be. It's what they have sometimes, for some people, become. If we want to look at the whole panoply, we should look at the religions that still have supernatural agent gods and those that don't. One sees the fossil traces of all that agency in every religion. I think it is the most important uniting feature of all the things we call religions. It's also true that many of those religions have become effectively etiolated, the agency having been draining out of them, and we're now left with what we might call former religions.

Daniel C. Dennett is Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University and director of the university's Center for Cognitive Studies.

*This article is adapted from remarks Daniel C. Dennett delivered at the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce in London regarding his new book *Breaking the Spell*. Used with permission*