

PIQUE

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Evolution is the subject—again—as we review two important new books and hear from two of our own on the never-ending subject of Science & Religion. We look also at Politics & Money from several perspectives, sing in praise of our Dear Leader and FEMA, and are instructed by such intellectual heavyweights as Tony Soprano, Al Sharpton, South Carolina Governor Sanford, and the cartoon characters Lisa Simpson and the Flintstones, some of whom are smarter than others. —J.R.

The Book Club reads “The Ancestor’s Tale”

A FIRST-CLASS SCIENTIST AND TEACHER

A Review of *The Ancestor’s Tale*

by Richard Dawkins

Samuel Milligan

When a first-class scientist is a first-class teacher, there is good reason to rejoice, since the combination is all too rare. This is a pity, since it is an educated public that ultimately funds science. The situation was exacerbated in the past by many scientists who maintained an “ivory tower” attitude – that science is somehow only for a special elite and must be kept away from the great unwashed public. Attendant on that was the feeling that anyone who popularizes science can’t be a really good scientist at bottom. The late Carl Sagan did much to overcome that attitude, though many of his colleagues regarded him as more of a TV star than a serious astronomer. He was, in fact, both.

But there is a howling need for scientists of the first rank who are also interesting teachers. Happily, we have one in Richard Dawkins, whose latest production, *The Ancestor’s Tale—A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution*, makes wonderful reading, as well as serving as an effective introduction to the world of genetics and evolution.

I confess that I was a bit daunted at first by the size of the thing – 614 pages (excluding index and bibliography) tightly packed with an incredible amount of information. I was also somewhat skeptical about the structure of the book, for instead of beginning at the beginning with the origins of life in our ultimate ancestral bacterium, Dawkins chooses to start with modern man and trace the biological family tree backwards.

Beginning with a discussion of *Homo sapiens*, and how he got to be us, he reaches back some six million years to find that ancestor that we share with our nearest biological relatives, the chimpanzees and bonobos. These pivotal common ancestors he calls “concestors,” a word of his own coinage, or so I believe. This first concestor is the 250,000-greats-grandparent—give or take a few generations in either direction—of both humans and chimpanzee/bonobos.

After each new concestor is introduced, Dawkins follows with one or two “tales” of a representative creature which clarifies matters for us. The Bonobo’s Tale introduces us to this gentler relative of the chimpanzee who prefers to resolve conflict with sex. Any

kind of sex—heterosex, homosex, paedophilia, gerontophilia, whatever. The females will occupy a tedious afternoon with genital rubbing, and the males will evidently copulate with anything that doesn't have splinters. Nor does the bonobo make a practice of slaughtering monkeys as the chimp is apt to do. Dawkins remarks that we moderns would like to think of ourselves as being closer to the bonobos and their "Haight-Ashbury free-love" lifestyle, rather than to the more murderous chimps, but the truth is, we are equally related to both.

Reaching back another million years or so, a second concestor, approximately our 300,000-greats-grandparent, is found which attaches us and the chimpanzee/bonobos to our mutual relatives, the gorillas. And so it goes, passing through ever more ancient concestors, and featuring a clarifying "tale" from representatives of each class.

It is these subsidiary tales—modeled, by the way, on Chaucer—that furnish Dawkins with the opportunity to pass on an incredible amount of information. Some are difficult reading, but all are fascinating. Attached to the chapter on the monotremes is one of my favorites, The Duckbill's Tale, in which I learned that the platypus uses its spatulate bill to pick up electrical impulses from its prey. A favorite food is a kind of freshwater shrimp whose muscles, in moving, produce a minute amount of electricity which the platypus can detect with sensors on his bill, even in the muddy stream bottoms where he chooses to hunt and where vision is so limited that he hunts with his eyes closed. (Who knew that every time we move a muscle, we produce electricity? Or that some fish such as the electric eel have ganged muscles together, which can accumulate a much more powerful charge, like several batteries wired in series.)

In any case, the duckbill hunts with not only his eyes closed, but his ears and nostrils as well. Although Dawkins doesn't make much of it, this closing off of certain senses has the advantage of making the remainder more acute. (Try it for yourself. If you are sanding a piece of wood, close your eyes when testing for smoothness. You'll find your sense of touch is heightened when your eyes are not using part of your brain to accommodate what you're seeing, even when not even consciously looking at anything in particular. Another example – as a musician, I found long ago that I can tune my instrument more accurately by listening with my eyes shut.)

I learned also that the male duckbill has a toxic spur on each rear foot capable of delivering a nasty sting which, while not fatal, is extremely painful. The pain, by the way, does not respond to morphine, so the molecular structure of the toxin is of great interest to those who are looking for a better pain reliever for cancer patients.

Dawkins's book is full of these little tidbits.

A very interesting chapter is devoted to The Great Cretaceous Catastrophe, in which so very many species went extinct, caused by the collision of a meteor with the earth. Such a collision is doubtless due to happen in the future sometime, but the percentages indicate that it will likely be after our own species has gone extinct. But that is only a likely estimate. In any case, it would be prudent if humanity made an effort to avert such an event. Dawkins says that:

A rational case can be mounted that humanity should start research into defensive measures now, to bring the technology up to the point where, if a credible warning were sounded, there would be time to put measures into effect.

He goes on to say that the best way to do this would be to either divert or destroy the incoming meteor, comet, asteroid or whatnot.

Politicians who invent external threats from foreign powers, in order to scare up economic or voter support for themselves, might find that a potentially colliding meteor answers their ignoble purpose just as well as an Evil Empire, an Axis of Evil or the more nebulous abstraction "Terror," with the added benefit of encouraging international cooperation rather than divergences. The technology itself is similar to the most advanced "star wars" weapons systems, and to that of space exploration itself. The mass realization that humanity as a whole shares common enemies could have incalculable benefits in drawing us together rather than, as at present, apart.

Dawkins also exhibits a welcome sense of humor. Treasuring wit as I do, I was pleased to find him indulging in such garniture as the following concerning the fact that we humans lost our tails somewhere along the line:

I think zoologists need to give more attention to the puzzle of why we apes lost our tail. The a posteriori counterfactual engenders pleasing speculations. How would the tail have sat with our habit of wearing clothes, especially trousers? It gives a different urgency to the classic tailor's question, "Does Sir hang to the left or to the right?"

We also meet Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), important and enthusiastic propagandist for evolutionism in Germany, described by Dawkins as a "dedicated atheist" who referred to God as a "gaseous invertebrate."

But this is just a bit of icing on top of a rather more serious cake. For instance, the genetics of evolution is explained in fine detail because the whole book is more than a description of the various life forms. It is a tale of the genes that those life forms contain. I do not pretend to be knowledgeable in these matters, and it will take a good bit of future effort on my part to really understand how it works. How, for example, DNA replicates itself. And an even deeper mystery to me, how genetic codes are read. But my lack of comprehension in genetic matters can be cured by simply mastering the information that Dawkins has furnished here. Future re-readings of at least those parts that I found to be tough going should enable me to handily confront anyone in the Intelligent Design mob.

Speaking of which, when I got the assignment to review this book, I indulged in my usual custom and looked up the reviews to be found on the Internet, partly to see if there might be something there I could rip off. One writer who had contributed to the Amazon.com website regretted the time Dawkins had to spend refuting the Creationist crowd. Actually, his comments in that direction would total no more than four pages or so. Considering the overall length of well over 600 pages, four pages amounts to pretty small potatoes. But in those pages Dawkins delivers some powerful shots. The "argument from design" is called the "argument from personal incredulity." He further says that the ID argument reveals "less about nature than about the poverty [of the speaker's] imagination."

Any complaints I have about the book are simply the expressions of my own prejudices. For example, some years ago, after I had eye surgery, I became fascinated with the evolution of not only human lenticular vision but other sorts of sight, such as that of the nautilus who utilizes a pin-hole, or the compound eye of the common house fly, or the horseshoe crab who has both compound and lenticular eyes. Dawkins mentions these various kinds of vision, but I would have liked more.

Also, my twisted mind has always regarded trilobites as being really "cute," and since they were a very important life form for millions of years, I had hoped for more

than just to learn that, judging from the fossil evidence, one trilobite evidently sought its prey in the same manner as the platypus. But trilobites are off the main line of our ancestry, and so get only peripheral treatment, as do the dinosaurs.

Anyhow, I was pleased to find a good index and a superb bibliography.

In conclusion, I will say that I actually found 614 pages not long at all. Clearly this is an important book by an important contemporary scientist, written with clarity, insight and wit. It is a superb source for anyone wanting to know what current genetic research has revealed as well as about evolution and our place in it.

One last item. It was not the purpose of evolution to create Homo sapiens. We are a fortuitous accident, nothing more.

THE PROBLEM WITH EVOLUTION

Russell Dunn

The fact that nearly half of the population in the United States questions the scientific validity of evolution is both astonishing and confounding. It may be that not only is unyielding resistance to the Theory of Evolution predicated on strict scriptural beliefs, but that other reasons, rational or irrational, have taken hold. I would like to present several that may apply.

Argument #1 goes as follows: God is all-perfect and therefore incapable of making something that is imperfect (although he clearly has the power to do so; otherwise he wouldn't be omnipotent). Since evolution is guided in totality by imperfection—otherwise all animate entities would reproduce perfectly and there would be no evolving of the species—then a belief in evolution is incompatible with a belief in God's perfection. Evolution, by this line of reasoning, therefore cannot exist.

Whether many religious enthusiasts actually espouse this argument is really immaterial, for it may be an implied understanding, or even an unconscious realization.

Argument #2 takes a different tack. The religiously devout are undoubtedly displeased that evolution presents a theory that is amoral and non-teleological, i.e.: having no meaning. To put it baldly, we cannot assume that human beings are the end products of evolution. In all likelihood we are but a point along a continuum whose direction is totally unpredictable. When looked at in terms of planetary history, the tenuous hold that humans have on life and supremacy becomes all too apparent. Earth's history is replete with major, unpredictable catastrophic events, such as asteroid impacts, where vast numbers of species have literally been wiped out in one fell swoop, creating niches that were then filled by creatures with newly developed properties, attributes, and abilities.

The thought that God (the ultimate moral authority and embodiment of perfection) has designed a mechanism based upon imperfection for creating humans that is amoral and meaningless is simply too much for many religious enthusiasts to bear.

And then there is argument #3. There are some biblical literalists who insist that the world was created a mere 6,000 years ago. If the history of the Earth only goes back 6,000 years, then how could evolution—a mechanism needing millenniums to create even rather subtle changes—have created human beings in virtually the blink of an eye. The cognitive dissonance created by this conflict is easily resolved by the religiously devout: evolution must be wrong!

Regardless of scientific arguments, however plausible they may be, some people will always find evolution objectionable. Many currently do, perhaps for some of the reasons I have outlined. Some have even taken to affixing stickers to books on evolution which state “It’s just a theory.” Without realizing it, they are being complimentary, for evolution is a pretty darn good theory, and its power to explain and predict is second to none.

WHAT, LIKE “THE FLINTSTONES”?

John Rafferty

In a recent episode of “The Sopranos” on HBO, mob boss Tony Soprano, recuperating in hospital after nearly dying from a gunshot, is visited by an evangelical “prayer leader.” Smiley-face “Pastor Bob” couldn’t be nicer, or smoother. He leads a short prayer for Tony’s recovery, for which Tony grudgingly but gratefully thanks him.

“It must be nice,” Tony admits, as wistfully as a 250-pound-plus extortionist, thief, and murderer can, “to have something to hold on to.”

Then the pastor picks up a children’s book on dinosaurs from Tony’s bedside, and riffles through it.

“Some people,” he says with a rueful smile for the folly of humankind, “would have you believe dinosaurs existed millions of years ago. It’s just not true. God created the earth six thousand years ago. And I tell my kids, ‘You have to remember that dinosaurs and human beings lived on the earth at the same time.’”

“What,” Tony says, “like ‘The Flintstones’?”

“It’s in the Bible.”

“Well, what about all that carbon dating stuff? A lot of scientists would disagree with you.”

“I think you’ll find all those people have an agenda, Tony: evolution – which is Satan’s plan to deny God.”*

A much written- and blabbed-about subject in the media recently is the idea that scientists themselves are responsible for the fact that so many Americans don’t believe in science, especially evolution. Secularists, skeptics, and rationalists, including the whole scientific community (but especially the Darwinians) are at fault for the fact that half of all Americans don’t believe in evolution, global warming, species extinction, the Big Bang and much else that’s established in modern science, but that enormous numbers of them do believe in an Earth only six thousand years old, in Atlantis, astrology, ghosts, flying saucers, yetis, Bigfoot, and images of the Virgin Mary on grilled cheese sandwiches.

Why? Because we don’t *respect* the beliefs of creationists and young-earthers. Because there is what the egregious Tom Bethell calls in his heavily-promoted *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Science* a “priesthood of science” that disdains non-scientists, especially the religious. If scientists would climb down from their ivory towers, the argument goes, if rationalists would not dismiss as idiocy the beliefs of biblical literalists, if skeptical secularists would only acknowledge how important faith is in the lives of most people, then more people might listen to the claims of science.

Nonsense. The fact is they *don’t* listen, and they don’t *want* to listen. The creationists and young-earthers spew their nonsense at school board meetings and “debates” all across the country, get hammered by the cold facts of fossil evidence or carbon dating,

and simply move on to the next “debate”—scattering press releases about “liberal media” cabals and a “war on religion”—where they again argue the same discredited hogwash.

That’s why many scientists and teachers, most famously Richard Dawkins, have at last lost patience with the dumb, the duped, and the deceitful, and refuse to participate in any more “debates.”

They’re right. Teaching the willfully ignorant is a greater waste of time than preaching to the converted.

True story: In the 60’s, when “The Flintstones” was new, I knew a woman, a graduate of Cornell, no less, who defended her weekly viewing of the prime-time cartoon series by saying that it was “interesting to see how they did things back in those days.”

*Also present in that “Sopranos” scene are Jewish mobster Hesch Rabkin and his daughter. After Pastor Bob leaves the hospital room, the daughter says, “You can disagree with the evangelicals, but they’re great friends of the Jews, because Israel is the Holy Land.”

Her father says, “You wait.”

MONEY CORRUPTS POLITICS, BUT CHRISTIANITY MAKES IT ALL BETTER

Conrad Claborne

One way to understand the money-and-politics mess in our public life (Ted Kennedy says congresspersons legislate Tuesday through Thurs-day, and spend the rest of the week raising money) is to see how cheaply one can buy influence.

For instance, the defense contractor Mitchell Wade—who has pleaded guilty to bribery and to making \$32,000 worth of illegal contributions to Representative Katherine Harris’ (R-FL) senatorial campaign—took Harris out to dinner at Washington’s Citronelle restaurant last year. The tab? \$2,800. Why was Mr. Wade willing to spend *thousands* on dinner-for-two? Because he was angling for Harris’s help in getting \$10 *million* in federal funding for one of his projects.

Harris, by the way (you remember her, she was the Florida Secretary of State who threw the 2000 election to Bush), when news of the dinner came out, first said she’d paid her own share; then 2) that she had no idea how expensive it was, then 3) that she’d “reimbursed” the restaurant for her share (why? the restaurant had already been paid); then, 4) no, she hadn’t “reimbursed” anyone, and don’t print that; and finally 5) that she’d squared everything by donating \$100 to a Florida Christian-dominionist-theology “charity.”

Oh, well, all right then.

Sadly, public indifference is another aspect of the problem. In a March 1, *New York Times* article about money in politics, the example was the current U.S. Senate race in Montana. “Interviews with dozens of Montanans suggest that riding the corruption charge to victory at the polls may not be easy for Democrats, in part because of public cynicism about politicians of both parties. What’s more, many voters here say they may be willing to shrug off the allegations [of corruption] because, like many incumbents, their senator can also use his influence to benefit them by bringing home a disproportionate share of federal spending.”

But perhaps it is time for a change. Maybe stories like the following can wake up America.

After acknowledging that he had “made a very wrong turn,” former Representative Randy Cunningham (R-CA) was sentenced in federal court last month to eight years and four months in prison for taking \$2.4 million in bribes from military contractors in return for smoothing the way for government contracts. Prosecutors, who called his misconduct unprecedented for its “depth, breadth and length,” said the sentence was the longest ever handed down for a member or former member of Congress in a federal corruption case.

Excuse me, *eight years*? For a “law and order” hypocrite honored for his tough-on-crime work in Congress by organizations that promote the building of prisons across the country where poor people can easily find themselves doing 25-year sentences for non-violent drug offenses? I call an eight-year sentence—he’ll be out on parole in less than three—an insult to the citizens of this country! Our elected officials should be held to a higher personal accountability for their actions. Perhaps life in prison would send the right message. The people we entrust with the power to *make* our laws betray us all when they fail to *uphold* our laws and values.

“Law and order”? Let’s start with the lawmakers and order-givers.

MANY SENATORS DEVELOPING SIMPLE TOOLS FOR GOVERNING

(Reprinted from The Onion satirical weekly 4/12/06.)

Washington, DC—Scientists who study congressional behavior reported Monday that some senators are capable of developing and using primitive legislative tools. “We noticed about a month ago that an alpha senator and majority-leader silverback named ‘Bill’ had taken to banging his lectern with a hammer-like implement instead of using his fist or a leg of meat as the others do,” said congressional anthropologist Allison Weathers, author of *Rotundas in the Mist*, the acclaimed account of life among the great congressmen of the Potomac River region of the U.S. “Since then we’ve seen multiple instances of tool use, such as small implements used for drafting and adjourning, as well as the rudiments of spoken language in the form of monosyllabic grunts such as ‘aye’ and ‘nay,’ common in group decision-making.”

Wherever you have an efficient government you have a dictatorship. — *Harry S Truman*

TWO CHEERS FOR AL SHARPTON

We can never forget that the Reverend Al Sharpton has been a liar (Tawana Brawley) and a thief (extorting Michael Jackson concert tickets for ghetto kids—“*Ain’t no way we don’t get a piece of that pie*”—then selling them instead), but once in a while ...

In a late-March “Hardball” show Chris Mathews opened a debate on the so-called “War on Christianity” with a clip of (now former) House majority leader Tom DeLay—indicted on charges of money laundering and conspiracy—addressing evangelicals during a gathering at which were sold such pamphlets as “Liberalism Kills Kids.” DeLay was introduced by Rick Scarborough, who said that DeLay’s faith had made him “a target for all those who despise the cause of Christ.”

In the clip, DeLay insisted that indeed “there is a war on Christianity,” an opinion with which Matthews’s guest Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, agreed. Then Matthews turned to Reverend Al.

“I think there’s a difference,” Sharpton said, “when you say that polls say ‘Christianity is under attack’ and then acting as if Christianity and the right wing are synonymous. I think the right wing has got Christianity under attack. The Christianity that was the basis of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement is certainly not the Christianity they are talking about. ... To say that someone stops a prayer that makes others that may pray a different way feel like they’re being imposed upon—and then to act like the symbol of Christianity is Tom DeLay—is a great leap. And I think that is where many of us who are Christians are offended by this group trying to misuse these kinds of situations.”

Perkins rebutted with a story about the county of Los Angeles having to remove a cross from its seal because of a lawsuit by the satanic ACLU (which he falsely claimed is tax supported).

“But that is not because they’re attacking the cross,” the Rev countered. “They’re saying there are those citizens who don’t believe in the cross. And I would have that position if there was a different religious symbol in a city that I lived in and paid taxes in. But I would like Tony to tell me how what Tom DeLay is facing has anything to do with his religion, or any religion at all. I think it’s an insult to Christians to act like because of his religion he’s been charged with what he’s been charged with. It has nothing to do with his religion.”

Perkins: “I don’t think anyone has said that, Al.”

Reverend Al: “I think *everyone* said that at that meeting. He was introduced as a man who was being persecuted because he stood up for Jesus. Tell me how Jesus and being accused of embezzling funds is the same thing. What chapter of the New Testament did you get that out of?”

THREE SIGNS THAT YOUR SUPERPOWER IS BECOMING A CHEAP RIP-OFF OF THE OLD SOVIET UNION

(From TheRudePundit.com, forwarded by David Rafferty.)

1. *Members of the party in power pledge allegiance to their party’s own symbol.* At a GOP dinner in San Diego, the attendees stood and began to say the Pledge of Allegiance until some observant diner noticed that there was no, you know, American flag to pledge to. “Pledge to the elephant,” shouted one quick-thinking Republican, and all the pledgers, including Rep. Darrell Issa, turned to say the pledge to a starred-and-stripped elephant banner.

2. *Children sing songs in praise of the government, no matter how incompetent it has been.* At the White House Easter egg hunt, a group of “Katrina Kids” sang a song about how great President Bush, Congress, and FEMA have been in helping them. Sung to the tune of that song of blind optimism, “Hey, Look Me Over,” only creepier:

*“Our country stood beside us,
People sent us aid.
Katrina could not stop us,
Our hopes will never fade.*

*Congress, Bush and FEMA,
People across our land
Together have come to rebuild us
And we join them hand-in-hand!"*

3. *The government creates guidelines telling adults what they can and can't do with their bodies.* The Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families has defined "abstinence" for abstinence-only programs seeking federal grants. That definition says abstinence means no sexual stimulation between two people unless one's a guy, one's a gal, and they're united in holy matrimony. That's it. Nothing else.

All we need to complete our transformation to the old USSR is morning bread lines, absurd government secrecy, spying on citizens, a foreign policy of militarily imposing our ideology on others, and soaring fuel prices ... oh. Um, scratch all that. All we need is morning bread lines, then welcome to the Politburo's America.

IT'S STILL \$400 BILLION DOWN THE DRAIN

Martin Reichgut, M.D.

Dr. Whitmore's response ("Saving Health Care," PIQUE, April, 2006) to my article ("An Improved Healthcare System," PIQUE, March, 2006) is a marvel of eloquence and passion. Eloquence and passion, however, cannot hide the fact that each year 400 billion health-care dollars are diverted by insurance companies for corporate expenses, executive perks, stockholder dividends, and the like. That money, if spent as intended, would provide hospital care, medical care, mental health care, some home care and nursing-home care, and full prescription drug coverage for seniors. All Americans would benefit, including many who have lost their jobs and lost their pensions through no fault of their own. "Health-care coverage for all" would significantly ameliorate the poverty that Dr. Whitmore alludes to and allow much of corporate America to again compete effectively in the world.

That's my concept of free enterprise.

BELIEVING IN BELIEF

**A Review of Breaking the Spell: Religion as a
Natural Phenomenon, by Daniel C. Dennett**

Michael Shermer

(Reprinted from eSkeptic, 2/23/06. Mr. Shermer is Executive Director of the Skeptics Society and a columnist for Scientific American magazine.)

In a 1997 episode of the animated television series "The Simpsons," Lisa Simpson discovers a fossil angel. Suspecting a hoax, she takes a piece of the fossil to the natural history museum where Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould (playing himself) analyzes it. The age-old conflict between science and religion then plays out in this ne plus ultra of pop culture. The town evangelical Ned Flanders bemoans: "Science is like a blabbermouth who ruins a movie by telling you how it ends." When Gould announces that the test results are "inconclusive," Reverend Lovejoy boasts: "Well, it appears science has failed again, in front of overwhelming religious evidence." Marge counsels Lisa's skepticism with motherly wisdom: "There has to be more to life than just what we see, Lisa. Everyone needs something to believe in." Lisa's rejoinder is classic skepticism: "It's not that I don't have a spiritual side. I just find it hard to believe there's a dead angel

hanging in our garage.” The Scopes-like trial that ensues ends when the judge issues a restraining order: “Religion must stay 500 yards from science at all times.”

This is, in fact, Gould’s conciliatory solution he called NOMA (Non-Overlapping Magisteria), and it is the primary target of Tufts University philosopher Daniel C. Dennett in his latest book, *Breaking the Spell*. All restraining orders are off, as Dennett calls for “a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.” The spell to be broken is the taboo that science will render incapable “the life-enriching enchantment of religion itself.”

So sensitive is he to the potential reaction on the part of his readers (which Dennett maintains is the general public, over 90 percent of which believe in God) that the first 55 pages of the book are an apology for why it is okay for religion to be studied scientifically. Readers familiar with such publications as *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* can skim this section, since the field has been around for over a century. My concern is that religious adherents will take offense at his rationale before they get to the heart of the book, where Dennett really shines. In one passage, for example, he tells believers that their repugnance to science is misdirected, but admits that his attempt to convince them otherwise “is a daunting task, like trying to persuade your friend with the cancer symptoms that she really ought to see a doctor now, since her anxiety may be misplaced and the sooner she learns that the sooner she can get on with her life, and if she does have cancer, timely intervention may make all the difference.” The deeply devout will not take kindly to their beliefs (about either science or religion) being equated with cancer. Or to cigarettes, as in this subsequent passage: “Sure, religion saves lives. So does tobacco — ask those GIs for whom tobacco was an even greater comfort than religion during World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam.”

Breaking the Spell is really written for scientists and scholars who have thought little on the subject of religion as a natural phenomenon. Dennett’s starting point is the “rational choice” theory of religion, proffered by sociologist Rodney Stark and his colleagues, which holds that the beliefs, rituals, customs, commitments, and sacrifices associated with religion are best understood as a form of exchange between believers and gods or God. Where resources and rewards are scarce (e.g., rain for crops) or nonexistent (e.g., immortality) through secular sources, then religion steps in to act as the exchange intermediary. To an evolutionist like Dennett, such exchanges demand that we look for a deeper causal vector:

Any such regular expenditure of time and energy has to be balanced by something of “value” obtained, and the ultimate measure of evolutionary “value” is fitness: the capacity to replicate more successfully than the competition does.

What is the value of religion to evolutionary fitness? In two books, I have outlined at least four such values:

1. *mythmaking* – to explain apparently inexplicable phenomena in the world,
2. *redemption* – (forgiveness in this life) and resurrection (immortality in the next life),
3. *morality* – (reinforcement of pro-social behavior and punishment of anti-social behavior), and
4. *sociality* – (encouragement of within-group amity and between-group enmity).

Do such values explain religion? We don’t know yet, Dennett admits, but the rest of his book presents a plausible explanation that I summarize as follows.

Humans have brains that are big enough to be both self-aware and aware that others are self-aware. This “theory of mind,” or what Dennett calls “adopting the intentional stance,” leads to a “hyperactive agent detection device” (HADD) that not only alerts us to real dangers, such as poisonous snakes, but also generates false positives, such as believing that rocks and trees are imbued with intentional minds, or spirits. “The memorable nymphs and fairies and goblins and demons that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us.” This is animism that, in the well-known historical sequence, leads to polytheism and, eventually, monotheism. In other words, God is a false positive generated by our HADD.

Around these animistic entities our ancestors created folk religions, which ... evolved into organized religions. During this transition there was competition among the countless god memes (each of whom were believed to control some tiny part of the world), out of which emerged the winner: a single God meme believed to control everything. Concomitant with God’s triumph was a corresponding belief in belief — not just belief in God, but belief in belief in God. This, says Dennett, was the *coup de grace*: religion no longer had to depend on uniformity of belief, only uniformity of professing belief.

Through his many provocative books Dan Dennett has emerged as the *advocatus diablos* of science, and his belief-in-belief concept is his most dangerous idea to date. It is dangerous because it is a two-edged sword that cuts for and against. On the one side, it not only grants believers some elbow room for doubt (as long as you still believe in belief in God), it allows atheists like myself (and Dennett) to profess that I believe in God; that is, I believe in the God that exists in the minds of people who themselves believe in the existence of an omniscient and omnipotent deity. That God is so powerful that He can get believers to bomb abortion clinics and fly planes into buildings.

On the flip side, perspicacious believers may perceive that an ontological trap is being set: belief in belief implies that the God in your head doesn’t actually exist. I predict that in the competitive memescape that is the human mind, the belief in God meme will beat out the belief in belief meme, as much as I would like to believe otherwise.

POPE BENEDICT ASKS IF IT’S TOO LATE TO CHANGE HIS NAME

(Excerpted from The Onion satirical weekly, 4/19/06)

Vatican City— Only a year after ascending to the papacy, Pope Benedict XVI is appealing to the College of Cardinals for a name change. “Benedict is serviceable enough, but I did not consider the ease of it being shortened to ‘Ben’ by impudent dignitaries such as Bono, nor did I foresee the difficulties it would pose whenever I ordered eggs.”

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #57

On January 29, South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford was interviewed on WIS-TV about teaching “Intelligent Design” in the public schools.

Gov. Sanford: Well, I think that it’s just, and science is more and more documenting this, is that there are real chinks in the armor of evolution being the only way we came

about. The idea of there being a, you know, a little mud hole and two mosquitoes get together and the next thing you know you have a human being is completely at odds with, you know, one of the laws of thermodynamics, which is the law of, of ... in essence, destruction.

FURTHER UPDATES ON THE RIGHT-WING WAR ON REASON

Science

Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman has decided to abolish the Science Advisory Board, a panel of experts that has served energy secretaries since the Carter administration. A spokesman said Mr. Bodman judged the board to be unnecessary after President Bush set the department agenda in his State of the Union address.

Medicine

The Food & Drug Administration on April 19 said that “no sound scientific studies” supported the medical use of marijuana, contradicting a 1999 review by a panel of highly regarded scientists. The FDA said eleven state initiatives that legalized marijuana use were “inconsistent with efforts to ensure that medications undergo the rigorous scientific scrutiny of the FDA approval process.” But scientists who study the medical use of marijuana say that the FDA has actively discouraged research.

But while marijuana, which anyone can grow in a window box, is now more illegal than ever, the FDA has given approval to a synthetic and a sprayed extract of the weed, both manufactured by large drug companies.

International Relations

The Bush administration has named Paul Bonicelli to be deputy director of the Agency for International Development (USAID). Bonicelli is a dean at Patrick Henry College in Virginia, which institution’s motto is “For Christ and Liberty,” and which requires all of its 300 students to sign a “statement of faith” declaring, among other things, they believe “all who die outside of Christ shall be confined in conscious torment for eternity.”

One can only wonder how Muslims, the target audience for USAID programs, will react to the news from America that “all who die outside of Christ shall be confined in conscious torment for eternity.” — *(Excerpted from CFI-Long Island Inquirer, April 2006)*

Homeland Security

President Bush established a Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the Department of Homeland Security. In the event of another hurricane, it will pray the levees hold. — *(Excerpted from Free Inquiry Group’s Fig Leaves, April, 2006)*