



BREAKING THE SPELL REVISITED

Richard W. Brooks
Emeritus Professor of Philosophy

The winter 2007 issue of *Oakland Journal* contains a review, written by Paul Graves of the Philosophy Department, of Daniel Dennett's book, *Breaking the Spell*, which Paul finds forthright and reasonable even though he fears that Dennett's tone will doubtlessly offend many. One of the interesting aspects of Dennett's book (and Paul's review of it) is that religion seems to be interpreted as exclusively Judeo-Christian. Perhaps that's understandable, since I believe that Paul has not made a careful (perhaps even a cursory) study of religions other than Christianity and to my knowledge Dennett has not done so either. It seems to me that if one is going to analyze what's wrong with religion, one should at least attempt to apply that analysis to all the various religions of the world, not just to those found in one's particular culture. Does Dennett's analysis apply, for example, to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Shintō, or Islam? Since I have studied those religions (and read translations—and in some cases the originals—of their sacred books), I rather doubt it.

There is a great difference between the theologies of the many different Hindu sects, just as there is between the four major sects of Buddhism (Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vāḷrayāna, and Tibetan), or even between subjects of those sects, espe-

cially those found in China and Japan. There is also a considerable difference between Sunni and Shiite theologies of Islam, just as there is between Protestant and Catholic theologies, or Orthodox and Reformed theologies of Judaism, etc. So it seems to me that Dennett is over generalizing about religion. And Paul, who can be at best described as agnostic, probably isn't familiar with any of those religions either. I, however, have not only read their scriptures (most, but not all, of them in translation), but have attended services conducted by different sects of Christianity (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Coptic), as well as services of Judaism, Shintō, Islam, Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. While I confess I was often at a loss to understand what was going on, I never felt "out of place" in any of those houses of worship. I have also read translations of the scriptures of the Incas, Mayans, and various Native American tribes. I have even attended a Wicca ceremony and came away with a very different, much more favorable, attitude toward that religion—even though I'm not at all attracted to their theology.

So, I think that if one is going to analyze (or criticize) religion, one ought at least to attempt to become aware of the many different varieties of religious belief. But perhaps that would inhibit one's analysis! It is much easier to find fault with something one knows only superficially. It is much easier to analyze religion at arm's length as it were, the way one might investigate some strange variety of insect. But one's analysis in that case would, I feel convinced, be at best superficial as a result.