SPIEGEL INTERVIEW WITH EVOLUTION PHILOSOPHER DANIEL DENNETT

"Darwinism Completely Refutes Intelligent Design" (2)

Dennett: It's at least interesting to see that quasi- or pseudo-Darwinian ideas are also popular in physics. They postulate a huge diversity from which there has, in a certain sense, been a selection. The result is that here we are and this is the only part of this huge diversity that we witness. That's not the Darwinian idea, but it's a relative. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had the idea -- I would guess perhaps inspired by Darwin -- of eternal recurrence: The idea that all the possibilities are played out and if the time is infinite and matter is infinite then every permutation will be tried, not once, but a trillion times.

SPIEGEL: Another idea of Nietzsche's was that God is dead. Is that also a logical conclusion reached by Darwinism?

Dennett: It is a very clear consequence. The argument for design, I think, has always been the best argument for the existence of God and when Darwin comes along, he pulls the rug out from under that.

SPIEGEL: Evolution, in other words, leaves no room for God?

Dennett: One has to understand that God's role has been diminished over the eons. First we had God, as you said, making Adam and making every creature with his hands, plucking the rib from Adam and making Eve from that rib. Then we trade that God in for the God who sets evolution in motion. And then you say you don't even need that God -- the law giver -- because if we take these ideas from cosmology seriously then there are other places and other laws and life evolves where it can. So now we no longer have God the law finder or the law giver, but just God the master of ceremonies. When God is the master of ceremonies and

DNA research, says Dennett, provides the most convincing arguments against creationism.
doesn't actually play any role any more in the universe, he's sort of diminished and no longer intervenes in any way.

SPIEGEL: How is it, then, that many natural scientists are religious? How does that go together with their work?

Dennett: It goes together by not looking too closely at how it goes together. It's a trick we can all do. We all have our ways of compartmentalizing our lives so that we confront contradictions as seldom as possible.

SPIEGEL: But this compartmentalizing has a positive side as well: Natural science talks about life whereas religion deals with the meaning of life.

Dennett: Fine. A boundary. But the trouble is that the boundary moves. And as it moves, the job description for God shrinks. I, too, stand in awe of the universe. It's wonderful, doesn't actually play any role any more in the universe, he's sort of diminished and no longer intervenes in any way.

SPIEGEL: But religion surely gives us moral standards and provides guidance on how to behave.

Dennett: If that's what religion does, then I don't think it is such a silly idea. But it doesn't. Religions at their best serve as excellent social organizers. They make moral teamwork a much more effective force than it otherwise would be. This, however, is a two-edged sword. Because moral teamwork depends to a very large degree on ceding your own moral judgment to the authority of the group. And that can be extremely dangerous, as we know.

SPIEGEL: But religion still helps us to set moral standards.

Dennett: But are we only morally good so that we get rewarded in heaven; so that God will punish us for our sins and reward us for good behavior? I find this idea extremely patronizing. It is offensive in that it suggests that that's the only reason people are moral. Do we only, for example, behave well to get 76 virgins in paradise? That's an idea that many in the West would scoff at.

SPIEGEL: Why then do pretty much all cultures have religion?

Dennett: I think the answer to that question is partly historical in the sense that traditions that survive evolve adaptations for surviving. So that religions themselves are extremely well designed cultural phenomena that have evolved to survive.

SPIEGEL: Like a biological species.

Dennett: Absolutely. A religion's design is completely unconscious in exactly the way the design of animals and plants is completely unconscious.
SPIEGEL: Do successful religions have similar features?

Dennett: They all have to have features for prolonging their own identity -- and a lot of these are actually interestingly similar to what you find in biology, too.

SPIEGEL: Can you give an example?

Dennett: Many religions started before there was writing. How do you get high fidelity preservation of texts before you have texts? Group singing and recitation are efficient mechanisms for maintaining and spreading information. And then we have other features too, like you really want to make sure there are some parts of religion that are really incomprehensible.

SPIEGEL: Why?

Dennett: Because then people have to fall back on rote memorization. The very idea of the Eucharist is a lovely example: The idea that the bread is symbolic of the body of Christ, that the wine is symbolic of the blood of Christ, that's just not exciting enough. The idea needs to be made strictly incomprehensible: The bread is Christ's body and the wine is his blood. Only then will it hold your attention. Then it will win in competition against more boring ideas simply because you can't quite get your head around it. It's sort of like when you have a sore tooth and you can't keep your tongue off it. Every good Muslim is supposed to pray five times a day no matter what.

SPIEGEL: You see that too as an evolutionary strategy to keep the religion alive?

Dennett: It's very possible. The Israeli evolutionary biologist Amotz Zahavi argues that behaviors which are costly -- which are hard to imitate -- are those that can best be handed down because non-costly signals can and will be faked. This principle of costly behaviors is well established in biology and it is present in religion. It is important to make sacrifices. The costliness is a feature you tamper with at your peril. If the imams got together and decided to remove that feature they would be damaging one of the most powerful adaptations of Islam.

SPIEGEL: By using this type of argumentation, can you predict which religions will win out in the end?

Dennett: My colleagues Rodney Stark and Roger Finke have researched why some religions spread quickly and others don't. They're adapting supply side economics to this and saying that there's a sort of unlimited market for what religions can give but only if they're costly. So they have an explanation for why the very bland and liberal Protestant religions are losing members and why the most extreme, intense religions are gaining members.
Intelligent Design is nowhere so widespread as in the United States?

Dennett: No, unfortunately I don't. But I can say, the alliance between fundamentalists or evangelical religion and right wing politics is a very troubling phenomenon and this is certainly one of the most potent reasons for it. What's really scary is that a lot of them seem to think that the second coming is around the corner -- the idea that we're going to have Armageddon anyway so it doesn't make much difference. I find that to be socially irresponsible on the highest order. It's scary.

SPIEGEL: Professor Dennett, thank you very much for this interview.

Interview conducted by Jörg Blech and Johann Grolle