REVIEW ESSAY

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY AND THE STUDY
OF RELIGION:
DARWIN'S DANGEROUS IDEA

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The depth, reach, and relevance of Darwinian thinking has been aptly expressed by Daniel C. Dennett; in this review essay I wish to assess its worth in the study of religion. In what follows I will look at the idea that religious meaning systems are evolving, complex entities that undergo evolutionary processes. This idea can also be expressed as follows: religious meaning systems have the same mode of operation as the organic biosphere.

Evolutionary thinking has pervaded Dennett’s work. Content and Consciousness (1969), Brainstorms (1982) and The Intentional Stance (1987) proposed a general theory of mind in which cognitive mechanisms and contents were constrained by environmental factors. In Dennett’s scheme, organisms try out different courses of action, and the selective forces of the environment choose the viable ones. With humans, and other complicated cognitive systems as well, it is possible to test actions in the inner environment first, and then proceed to act in the outer environment. Human cognitive systems are complex enough that our ideas can die instead of us, a development that was a major leap in the general evolution of organisms. This evolutionary standpoint, where systems are understood with reference to their inner and outer environments, was one of the constituents of Dennett’s Intentional System Theory: intentional systems are belief-generating systems that test their ideas in the inner and outer environments. In Consciousness Explained (1992), Dennett took a more explicit evolutionary turn. Consciousness itself, according to him, is a collection of memes, units of meaning competing for existence. The Multiple Drafts model of consciousness compares the human mind to a gene pool in which constant struggle, change, and combinatory possibilities rule. The idea that individual consciousness is a system of memes realized in human brains invites one to think of meaning systems as something supraindividual, social and shared. Cultural
meaning systems, or religions for that matter, have seriously attracted Dennett’s interest only in his book, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (1995). I think that of Dennett’s work, this is the one that no student of religion should ignore.

The Darwinian view of religion is that religious meaning systems and the human groups that embody these systems are subject to selection. In the final analysis, religious traits, like patterns of behavior, material artifacts, beliefs and ideologies are, cultural systems, and they materialize in concrete entities like human beings or crafted pieces of wood.

Religious groups are cultural facts. This means that their causal origins, their existence, properties, changes and impacts are dependent upon cultural structures. Systems of meaning, which guide and constrain the thought and behavior of human beings, are examples of cultural structures. From the viewpoint of ontology, religious groups are hybrid entities: they instantiate biological and socio-cultural properties. Many of their properties have been brought into being by facts of culture like conscious decisions and selection, or straightforward social engineering. They retain their biological properties, of course, but these are modified by, and intermixed with, cultural properties.

Religious groups are therefore “citizens of two worlds”—units of natural selection and units of cultural selection. By cultural selection we mean the following: religious items—like the contents of the worldview and ritual patterns—undergo selection in cultural environment. This environment is constrained by biological and physical boundary conditions, but the interesting factors affecting the religious traits are themselves cultural mechanisms. Properties of religious groups are rooted in cultural and natural worlds, and they differ from each other in the degree to which they belong to these respective worlds. Age structure, for example, is founded upon biological properties which do not allow just any variation whatsoever, no matter how much the members would desire it. Due to the hybrid nature of these groups, cultural selection affects the biological properties of these groups as well.

The conditions of cultural selection are replication, variation, and differential fitness of religious traits (Dawkins 1989; Kamppinen 1989). Let us take a closer look. Replication of religious traits is actualized in the processes on enculturation, learning, communication, and so on, that is, in those processes where meanings are trans-