

Why Bother with Belief?

Books discussed:

[*Freedom Evolves*](#). By Daniel C. Dennett. New York: Viking, 2003. xiii + 347pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

[*Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871- 1933*](#). By Maureen Flanagan. Princeton and Oxford:

Princeton University Press, 2002. xiv + 319pp. \$37.95 (cloth).

[*God against the Gods: The History of the War between Monotheism and*](#)

[*Polytheism*](#). By Jonathan Kirsch. New York: Viking Compass, 2004. ix + 336pp. \$25.95 (cloth).

[*Reimagining Christianity: Reconnecting Your Spirit without Disconnecting*](#)

[*Your Mind*](#). By Alan Jones, Ph.D. New York: Wiley, 2004. xxiv + 251pp. \$24.95 (cloth)

[*The Real State of the Union: From the Best Minds in America, Bold*](#)

[*Solutions to the Problems Politicians Dare Not Address*](#). Ed. Ted Halstead, in partnership with *The Atlantic Monthly*. New York: Basic Books, 2004. xiii + 287pp. \$14.95 (paper).

[*The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*](#). By

Jonathan Sacks. London and New York: Continuum, 2002. xi + 216pp. \$19.95 (cloth).

[*Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*](#).

By Juliet Schor. New York: Scribner, 2004. 275pp. \$25 (cloth)

As social animals, we survive by belonging: one wildebeest separated from the herd of wildebeesties soon comes to a sad end; and, in any species, strangers are seldom welcomed into established groups. Religion inevitably, dangerously appeals to this biological drive to mark the boundaries between in-group and out-group. Furthermore, as the story of Cain and Abel attests, religious "acceptability" always plays into the human will to power, commonly to no good end. As a result, the historical link between religion and violence is undeniable. In the light of this history, and especially when our own house is in such disarray, we need solid answers for the honest skeptics who argue, "why bother?" Why bother with religion at all? Unless we can engage such skeptics thoughtfully, we will have little opportunity to raise the bigger, more often submerged question, *Is God real?*

Jonathan Kirsch, *God Against the Gods: The History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism*, is unlikely to be reviewed in the established intellectual journals in religion. It's an unabashedly anti-monotheist, more specifically anti-Christian polemic, one-sidedly arguing that the rise of Christianity was a cultural disaster. Christians were persecuted, he explains, because they refused the small civic gestures of patriotism, gestures largely devoid of theological content. Those who refused were forced to hand over

their "Bibles" and executed as seditious threats to a civic order that insisted upon religious tolerance and generous inclusivity. When Christianity itself came to power, it instituted a violent, repressive theocracy that put an end to the gracious liberalism the Romans and the "charms" of paganism in all its colorful, comforting, life-affirming variety. Worse yet, Christians also abhorred the wealth of classical learning, thereby plunging Europe into the Dark Ages. Implicit throughout is the claim that repressive, narrow-minded intolerance is true to the innate character of monotheism, whether Christian or Islamic.

I suspect that many general readers will never detect the missing or distorted historical facts, much less the rhetorical sleights of hand: Kirsch is detailed enough, and good enough with sources and documentation, to be very persuasively authoritative. And he writes well. He tells a remarkably engaging story, and that by itself becomes persuasive, especially for anyone alert these days to the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism. Kirsch stops just often enough to acknowledge, for instance, that official Roman religious ceremonies had grown empty, or that some Christians on some occasions did good things--but he never engages the kinds of arguments made by, for instance, Rodney Stark in *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*.

God against the Gods nonetheless merits attention as an effort, however thinly popular, to rewrite the history of religion in late antiquity from the losers' point of view, as the triumph of radical, narrow-minded, self-righteous

theocrats. Kirsch never calls these people "orthodox" believers. He calls them "rigorists," thereby leaving open the possibility (albeit never explored) that they misrepresented the Christian faith. But he does argue that if one takes monotheism at its word then other gods are either demons or delusions. That's an easy position to support whether from Scripture or from early-church sources.

It seems to me that Kirsch both arises from and speaks to how many people are convinced by contemporary political affairs, both at home and abroad, that religion is inescapably prone to arrogance, intolerance, and violence. Kirsch equips these worried folks with a version of church history that confirms their darkest fears: if left to our own devices, monotheists will always turn into variations upon the Taliban. As popular historians always do, Kirsch manages the themes of his narrative in ways that allow these contemporary issues to remain in orbit around the ancient history he recounts. For instance, he translates "pagan" as "of the people" in ways that implicitly associate paganism with democracy, and hence Christianity with tyranny.

Intelligent believers need to be able to refute such portraits, and the first step in that process may be reading books like Kirsch's so that we understand what we are up against. Can Christianity be not simply "tolerant" but both generous and genuine in its respect of other religions? Can Christianity honestly contribute to the human quest for wisdom and for peace in a global

society, or is Christian identity tied, hopelessly and inescapably, to a "jealous" God who demands the conversion "of all nations" to the true faith? The historical record is not particularly promising. I worry that too few ordinary Christians recognize just how cogent these questions are for honest, thoughtful people outside the church.

Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain and the Commonwealth, offers a brilliant set of answers in *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. He acknowledges with great clarity that "Religion is about identity, and identity excludes. For every 'We' there is a 'Them,' the people not like us" (p. 46). He argues that religion will either defuse the conflicts that exploitative economic globalism provokes, or religion will fuel these conflicts into global conflagration. There is very little space for a middle ground between these stark alternatives. Religion can defuse the conflict, Sacks contends, if it can successfully demand a due regard for the dignity and the needs of each human person. Such due regard is currently denied by both religious radicals and free-market true believers. Given this situation, however, the pressures of globalization entail "a call to a faith [that is] larger and more demanding than we had sometimes supposed it to be" (p. 17).

In Sacks's hands, monotheism supplies a rich, engaging, and intellectually rigorous account of what religion can offer a global society. Sacks offers what he calls a theology of difference: why it exists, why it

matters, why it is constitutive of our humanity, and why it represents the will of God, "who no more wants all faiths and cultures to be the same than a loving parent wants all children to be the same" (p. 56). Arguing consistently from within the wealth of his own tradition, Sacks explains that although God is the God of all, the creator of the entire cosmos, the faith of Abraham is not the faith of all (p. 53)--nor should it be. God is universal, but religion is particular; religion is the translation of the utterly transcendent God into the particular cultural "language" of a given community. No one religion fully expresses the reality of God, just as no one human language provides unmediated, transcendent, "objective" access to reality.

Classic Enlightenment liberalism errs, then, in supposing that "there is only one truth about the essentials of the human condition, and it holds true for all people at all times" (p. 50). On the contrary, Sacks explains: "Plato's assertion of the universality of truth is valid when applied to science and the descriptions of what is. It is invalid when applied to ethics, spirituality, and our sense of what ought to be" (p. 54). Most of *The Dignity of Difference* is Sacks's quite learned diagnosis of the discontents of globalization, and an explication of moral principles that ought to determine the direction and the priorities of a global economy. He does not delineate specific policies to achieve these ends: that's not his job. As a theologian and moralist, his job is to explain "what ought to be"--and, above all, why.

All of his reasons why circle back to the pre-requisites of social capital formation on a global scale: the "master disciplines" of politics and economics fail to preserve the social capital and the virtues upon which they themselves depend. Only religion can do that, but only if believers can turn aside from what Sacks describes as the "harsh texts" condemning the stranger. We now live too close to too many strangers. *The Dignity of Difference* offers an exemplary model of what theologians can contribute to public debates--and, furthermore, how we should go about doing so. It is a visionary, eloquently poetic book, rich in a deeply solemn hope that humanity will prove itself equal to the terrible challenges posed by globalism.

Alan Jones's new book *Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting Your Mind* offers an analysis that is quite complementary to Sacks's. Where Sacks writes in the measured tones of an international diplomat about the broadest global issues, Jones pointedly addresses "disillusioned and questioning" individuals who are alienated by hostile, mindless versions of Christian faith, bewildered by the "theodiversity" of the contemporary religion marketplace, and unwilling to countenance any religious claim to absolute and universal truth. It's a feisty book, passionate and provocative, impatient with literal mindedness among believers and disbelievers alike.

Jones insists that "the way out of our decadence is to recover the life of imagination" (p. xxiv), because "religion at its heart is a work of the

imagination" (p. 74). We must understand, he explains, that dogma is not the last word but the first word, moving us into mystery and into the realm of metaphor, poetry, and myth (p. 144), where we can begin to see and to experience realities that are accessible in no other way (p. 29, p. 131). I've worked for thirty years now on religion and imagination, and I came away admiring how shrewdly Jones selects and deploys his major sources, including depth psychology. He stops several times for autobiographical anecdotes that the non-philosophical reader will find quite helpful.

That's the first half of the book. The second half delineates his own understanding of the symbols and images that most clearly define the Christian vision, concluding with brief but thoughtful suggestions about how one might begin the practices of faith. Jones's vision focuses upon three images: the pregnant woman or the mother and infant, images for the challenge of new life; the Crucified One, an image for all of suffering humanity and for the inevitability of suffering; and the Trinity, an image of community as the possibility of honest, loving, relationships in which the otherliness of the other is not subsumed.

Reimagining Christianity might be a potent book to use with a newcomers' class, provided the leader understands enough about metaphor and about symbolic thinking to handle the inevitable questions comfortably. To say that a doctrine or creed is essentially metaphoric is not to say that it is anything less than absolutely and reliably true. It's merely a label

for what sort of truth it is and about what sort of issue. Language is in this regard like a lens: some lenses, like some uses of language, can bring some objects into focus but not others. To focus upon the truths that religious wisdom conveys, one needs a very particular sort of discourse, one that is especially rich *and particularly subtle* in its use of metaphor. Until one begins to understand the issues that religious discourse engages, the metaphoric depth of the best religious discourse is apt to remain either thoroughly opaque or else literal nonsense, badly entangled with both magical causality and dubious metaphysics.

With the same caveat about leadership, I also recommend *Reimagining Christianity* for teen groups, campus groups, confirmation classes, and 20-something groups. Jones's no-nonsense style, which might disconcert the established middle-aged church-goer, is apt especially to attract younger seekers. I think they will also find persuasive his deeply personal passion about the meaning of "a good life." In fact, I'm ordering copies for some of my 20-something kids--and for some of their friends as well. They are all English majors; they understand poetry and how poetic language works. It's God they are trying to find, and literal-minded religion keeps getting in the way.

I find myself wondering what would happen if *Reimagining Christianity* were read and discussed in the usual middle-class congregation by Sunday-school teachers or the vestry. It might disconcert, or perhaps even awaken, those for whom religious allegiance is what Jones calls a "lifestyle

accoutrement" or a "harmless hobby"-- those who don't take dogmas and doctrines seriously enough either to believe or to disbelieve coherently. That might prove lively: as Jones shrewdly observes, "Generous versions of the great spiritual traditions tend to enrage people" (91). But other people, surely, are desperately eager for such constructions.

Nonetheless, I suspect that many congregations are in effect held captive to the "soft" literal-mindedness of people for whom *true* can mean only *literally true*--people who have no understanding at all of metaphoric or symbolic truth. Many such people seem quite content for religion to be what Jones calls "the chaplain of the status quo" (101), partly from laziness and partly because they don't see an alternative that is both feasible and appealing. In such captive congregations, the central practice of the faith is the committee meeting. Thoughtful individuals trapped in such churches may find this the most comforting book they have read in years.

Sacks and Jones are both convinced that human life has meaning, a claim not easily made in our day. Sacks contends at one point that "we are not cosmic dust on the surface of eternity" (180-181), and Jones observes that "the life of the will--how and what we choose to do with our lives--is at the center of the spiritual life. And our choices matter" (119). This issue is addressed in what seems to me an intriguing book: *Freedom Evolves*, by Daniel C. Dennett, who is University Professor and Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at

Tufts University. The opening paragraph of chapter one unabashedly proclaims the scope of his ambition:

One widespread tradition has it that we human beings are responsible agents, captains of our fate *because* what we really are are *souls*, immaterial and immortal clumps of Godstuff that inhabit and control of material bodies rather like spectral puppeteers. It is our souls that are the source of all meaning, and the locus of all our suffering, our joy, our glory and shame. But this idea of immaterial souls, capable of defying the laws of physics, has outlived its credibility thanks to the advance of the natural sciences. Many people think the implications of this are dreadful: We don't really have "free will" and nothing really matters. The aim of this book is to show why they are wrong (1).

Dennett's spectral puppeteer is an excellent instance of literal-minded religion: I don't for a moment believe in such a thing, but I confess that what Dennett describes approximates quite well the doctrine I learned as a child. And we do continue all too easily to talk about "the immortal soul" as if there were some clump of causality-defying stuff set loose inside us somewhere, responsible for whatever moral significance our lives have. In short, Dennett pinpoints a serious issue: can we defend the concepts of free will, moral responsibility, and the meaning of life without resort to literal-minded, physics-defying ghosts in

the machine? That's why *Freedom Evolves* is worth reading, despite Dennett's quite pointed opposition religious faith in any form.

In *Freedom Evolves*, Dennett argues hard for the reality of human responsibility, taking on those who contend that "free will" is--like "God"--a pious illusion. It's not an illusion, he contends, but not because human are exempt from the networks of causality shaping the universe as we know it. We are not exempt. The universe is "deterministic." But, Dennett argues, we can nonetheless make meaningful choices, because our personal futures are not immutably fixed.

How can this be? Well, for starts, everything depends upon how narrowly "determinist" is defined. Cognitive science pursues these issues by means of research with computer simulations, including a variety of programs simulating the behavior of entities called "cellular automata" that behave according to various algorithms. (The most widely-discussed of these is an intriguing computer program called "Life." Computer adepts can play with it themselves by downloading a user-friendly version at <http://psoup.math.wisc.edu/Life32.html>) Such research demonstrates that even though the behavior of these automata are strictly controlled by the programmer's algorithms, the "worlds" thus generated vary from absolutely static through blindly cyclical to utterly unpredictable depending upon the algorithm used. This demonstrates that determinism at the level of design (the

algorithm) can nonetheless generate a "cosmos" in which behaviors and outcomes are not simply inevitable.

Obviously the issues are more complex than this little summary suggests. Issues get remarkably complex, in fact, although at a surface level I found Dennett's explications consistently intelligible. It seems to me that what's at stake across the board in the issues Dennett engages is whether or not contemporary science has in effect returned us to the classic Greek vision that a person's individual future is fixed--by the laws of physics and neurophysiology, perhaps, if not by the three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who spin the thread of life, determine its particular shape, and cut it off at death.

Dennett contends that such fatalism is scientific nonsense. He makes a great argument, one that Christians ignore at no small cost to our ability to make the hope we preach intelligible to our own times. Much in the world, Dennett contends, is "*determined* to be changeable, chaotic, and unpredictable" (90). Furthermore, even where we do face phenomena that are predictably fixed and regular, many of them have only weak causal force, none of which is alone sufficient to carry the day.

For instance, I am genetically predisposed to osteoporosis and to heart disease. That genetic inheritance was determined before I was born. But knowing all this, I can take the obvious steps, being rather more scrupulous from a much earlier age about calcium supplements, diet, and regular check-

ups. In doing so, I am making equal, but in effect opposite use of other aspects of my genetic heritage, such as persistence or anxiety or attention to details. As a result of the complexity of my genetic design, then, my lab reports are excellent. But week after week, I do have to decide to dole out those big calcium tablets into the pill case and to limit my consumption of rare roast beef. It's a choice. We have choices. And we have choices about many more serious things than the level of saturated fat in our diets.

Human beings are not locked into a fated future because we are designed--i.e., genetically determined--to learn from what we encounter, to fix our mistakes, to recognize and capitalize upon opportunity, to share information via language and culture, and so forth (92-93; 143). Add to this the unpredictability of a cosmos in which much is objectively "chaotic" in the mathematical sense. Because our world is designed as it is, and we are designed as we are, our individual futures are neither predestined nor predictable--*even though we are not somehow exempt from the material regularities of a causally-governed cosmos.*

Formulated at this distance, Dennett's claims bear a rough family resemblance to those made by scientists as radically different as biologist Richard Lewontin in *It Ain't Necessarily So: The Dream of the Human Genome and Other Illusions* and physicist Arnold Benz in *The Future of the Universe: Chance, Chaos, God*. The value of these argument for Christian apologists is clear: we need to know how to refute those who say religion is nonsense

because "science" has proved that we live in a determinist universe where our characters and our fates are fixedly meaningless. Even more poignantly, we need to be able to draw upon such work as part of consoling those who have fallen into the fatalist trap, doubting the possibility of change for the better in their own lives. A certain level of science literacy is crucial, lest we invoke the power of grace either prematurely or inappropriately.

The hopes of Christians are differently grounded than the hopes of secular humanists like Daniel Dennett. But however grounded, such hope differs remarkably from the bleak fatalism and the hermeneutics of suspicion that remain endemic in our culture. Such grim fatalism is fully manifest among those who say there is absolutely nothing we can do to constrain the ravages of a hyper-rationalized "free" market, as well as by those who say religions cannot possibly escape the narrowly literal-minded doctrinal confines of their cultural heritage.

In short, Christians should extend "the dignity of difference" not only to other faiths but also to those who, like Daniel Dennett, refuse to credit any form of transcendence or spiritual reality at all. In July of 2003, you may recall, Dennett was briefly but widely in the news after suggesting in a *New York Times* article that those who refuse religious belief altogether take to calling themselves "brights" rather than "atheists" or "agnostics" or "humanists." Richard Dawkins made the same proposal a couple of weeks earlier in the *Guardian*. (Both of these articles are available as links from the-

brights.net.) The religion they attack is shallow, shabby, and literal-minded, but who among us can deny how much of that is out there?

People like Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Steven Pinker probably don't read serious theology carefully, but how many serious theologians read science like theirs seriously? When I have made an effort to do so, I inevitably discover that they are more intelligent, more humane, and far more interesting thinkers than the figures of parody held up in hostile reviews in the national media. What Galileo said, thought, and believed, after all, differed remarkably from what his accusers said that he said--but bystanders would have had to expend some serious effort to work through his publications for themselves. It's far easier to preach to the choir, whether that's in churches or at the Center for the Study of Cognitive Science: contempt is cheapest when its targets are out of sight. We can't afford to indulge such petty stuff much longer, not from either side. Dennett's defense of free will is intriguing and valuable; as far as I can tell, the world he depicts is fully compatible with any God worth having around, although clearly Dennett doesn't see it that way. There is a potential for serious conversation here. Will it happen?

I'd like to conclude with a small stack of books that would be excellent follow-up reading for any of the books discussed so far, follow-ups that can help us connect rich new ideas with the fabric of ordinary life. To follow up Sack's concern with the moral and spiritual issues involved in the economics

and politics of globalization, graze at your pleasure in *The Real State of the Union: From the Best Minds in America, Bold Solutions to the Problems Politicians Dare Not Address*, edited by Ted Halstead, in partnership with *The Atlantic Monthly*. As it happens, these "best minds in America" are all associated with the New America Foundation, which describes itself as an "independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan" organization fostering new voices and new thinking that "transcend the conventional political spectrum" (www.newamerica.net).

Whether or not one agrees with the proposed solutions--all of which seem to me at least worth a hearing--the essays present solidly documented, intriguing data about an array of important problems, problems which can usually be traced back to the impact upon our society of global economic pressures and severe economic "rationality": income disparity, consumer debt, the depopulation of the Great Plains, jail conditions and the impact of incarceration, fertility rates, the loss of social capital, and so forth. One might present these data about a problem to a group, then do a classic theological reflection testing Jones's contention that dogmas, doctrines, and creeds have to be understood as symbolic discourse and as metaphors for the ineffable. Or one might test the author's solution against the principles Sacks delineates. One way or another, such a "God and Globalization" series could be a lively demonstration of why, amidst the demands of daily life, a thoughtful person might bother with belief in the first place.

Another approach might invite parents to read Juliet Schor's new book, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*. The average eight-to-thirteen year-old, she explains, watches 40,000 television commercials a year. Add to that, of course, the ads on the radio, the internet, in print media, and the sides of buses. Such advertising is increasingly aimed at children directly, preying upon their developmentally-appropriate anxieties, alienating them from parents, encouraging "forbidden" behavior and precocious sexual display, etc. etc. The more children buy into this market definition of "cool," the more likely they are to be depressed and alienated. I've lectured about Schor's findings to a couple of parents' groups already, and their responses were electric: given this commercial pressure, parents have to take a strongly pro-active stance in communicating richer, healthier moral norms and social ideals. But how? As a follow-up reading, *Reimagining Christianity* might help parents face and cope with their own deeper questions about the faith--questions they might otherwise continue to ignore under the considerable pressures of ordinary family life. But parents can't pass on a faith they don't truly possess, and Juliet Schor might convince them that they must figure out how to do so.

Finally, for any true historians out there, I want to put in a good word for Maureen Flanagan's *Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City 1871-1933*. Flanagan has clearly spent years reading through archives scattered all over town, painstakingly reassembling a detailed

history of how women assembled themselves into neighborhood groups, and then networked with other groups across the city, to push a progressive agenda that differed remarkably both from the business interests that controlled city government and from the agenda of male progressives.

The story begins with the Great Fire, after which men wanted only cash donations so that local business alone would profit from rebuilding. They also blocked emigration from the city, lest workers depart, and refused support to anyone with any resources however, no matter how meager, so as to "encourage" employment and maintain cash reserves necessary for the rebuilding and infrastructure projects needed after the disaster. Chicago women subverted these goals by soliciting material goods from their women friends across the country. They gave away what could be distributed directly, and concocted schemes of their own in other circumstances, such as hiring women to make free clothes from donated cloth upon donated sewing machines.

For fifty years, Flanagan recounts, Chicago city government made decisions favorable to business interests, not the common good. Meanwhile Chicago women steadfastly, ingeniously organized themselves, even across racial and religious lines, to advocate for and to serve the immediate, practical needs of city households. It's a great story, and Flanagan does a remarkably good job of telling the tale even while doing the necessary historian's job of rescuing massive quantities of detail from their scattered, fragile cartons.

The women seldom prevailed. And what difference, then, do such efforts make? Do they, did they, make a difference at all? City budgets are still spending millions on projects far more advantageous to business interests than to the needs of the poor, the hungry, the sick, and so forth. My daughter-in-law teaches in a city high school where, last week, health inspectors found rats in the cafeteria kitchen and closed it down immediately. No one had lunch that day, and meanwhile, that very same day, broken toilets let sewage seep through the ceilings. Despite the January cold, every window in the building had to be opened to cope with the stench.

My niece also teaches in a city high school; hers does not have a photocopier, so when she needs to give an exam she has to go to Kinko's--and she is not reimbursed. She just turned twenty-five; she has school loans to pay off: she can't afford this, but somehow the city can afford gorgeous new planters all up and down Michigan Avenue, plus a multimillion-dollar refurbishing of Grant Park. The park and the landscaping are spectacular, but I enjoyed them much more before I read *Seeing with Their Hearts*. Now I see them differently. Now I realize--with Sacks and Jones, with Flanagan, with Dennett--that we *do* have choices. And we are choosing badly.

Despite the ways in which religion can serve and has always served violence and repression, at its best it can preserve and advance a wisdom that truly does surpass human understanding: wisdom to persist in virtue whose consequences we cannot see and despite voices insisting that virtue is futile or

illusory. Religion has become a dangerous part of global resistance to the predations of the 24/7 global market and to the dislocations generated by historically-unprecedented pace of cultural change. But religion is also key to whatever solutions we may slowly devise, because religion is the surest, most ancient assembly of wisdom about the human experience. Why bother with belief? Because the alternative is certainty, which is in our times is a particularly dangerous self-indulgence.

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