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Are religions a necessary evil?

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# Are religions a necessary evil?

Religion as a global phenomenon: extracts from a lecture by Professor Daniel Dennett, director, Center for Cognitive Studies, Tufts University, on 13 March 2006

The dairy cow was designed over millions of years by a process of natural selection. It was a wild species descended from the aurochs (a large wild ox). When the aurochs became domesticated it came under the conscious, deliberate design of breeders who were set on taking this beast and turning it into something for human purposes.

Much the same thing is true of religion. Religions have not existed on the planet forever; they are quite a recent phenomenon. Organised religions are more recent than the domestic cow. They evolved from wild ancestors and they are still evolving. If we want to understand religions, we need to subject them to scientific scrutiny.

Religions are brilliantly designed products. It is no wonder that they have the hold over us that they do. Some of them are the products of intelligent human re-engineering, some the products of essentially blind human tinkering such as 'early domestication' and some are more ancient still and owe their existence to evolution and natural selection.

Go out in the meadow and you will see an ant climbing a blade of grass. As you watch this ant climbing and climbing, you think, "What is this ant doing?" He climbs until he gets to the very top of the blade of grass. And you think, "What's this all for? Is he hunting for food? Is he lost? Is he showing off to potential mates?" And that turns out to be the wrong question.

*Dicrocoelium dendriticum* is a small parasitic brain worm that has to get into the belly of a sheep or a cow to continue its reproductive cycle. It commandeers a passing ant and hops into its brain and drives it like an all-terrain vehicle up the blade of grass to improve its chances of being eaten by a cow or a sheep. Here we have a hijacker, a parasite that infects the brain and induces suicidal behaviour on behalf of a cause other than one's own genetic fitness. Does anything like that ever happen to us?

The Arabic word 'Islam' means 'submission.' It means surrender of self-interest to the will of Allah. But Islam is not alone in this. Consider these words: 'The heart of worship is surrender. Surrendered people obey God's Word even if it doesn't make sense.'

They come from the recent book by Pastor Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. So it's not that Christians abhor the image of themselves as selfless servants of an idea that has attached itself to them; they glory in it. We all do – religious and secular alike – because there are many ideas to die for, not just Islam and Christianity.

Think of all the people in the 20th century who sacrificed their lives to further the well-being of the idea of Communism. They were making a terrible mistake, but they certainly devoted their lives to it. Or democracy. Probably everybody in this room has a relative who gave up his or her life to further this cause. Or justice. Or freedom.

It is a remarkable biological fact about humans that we are in a position to replace our genetic imperative with other imperatives. It is the key to our civilisation and it is itself the gift of human culture. It is because we have language and culture that we have achieved this remarkable independence from our genetic imperatives.

I often hear, "Oh! You've got an evolutionary theory of religion, do you? I've always wondered what religions are for. I'm sure they're good for us, after all every human group that has ever been studied has had religion."

Well you might be right, but not so fast. Every human group that has ever been studied also had the common cold. What is it for? It is for itself and it survives because it can.

For a complete transcript or audio download of 'Breaking the Spell: Religion as a global phenomenon', with remarks from Reverend Professor Alister McGrath, please visit [www.theRSA.org/events](http://www.theRSA.org/events)

## lecture summaries