

# Authors challenge biblical God in different ways

## Readable style, rhetoric define atheist writers

By RICHARD N. OSTLING  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

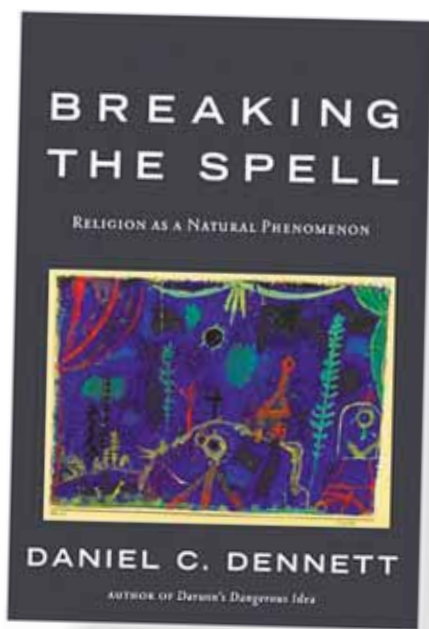
Atheism and skepticism wield some advantages in the religious aspect of America's culture wars, including sympathy among strategic opinion leaders in higher education and the media.

That's reflected in writings from academic star Daniel C. Dennett and reactions to popularizer Sam Harris.

Most everyone in every country and century has generally aligned with the Bible, which doesn't argue for God's existence but assumes it: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1).

Nonsense, says Harris in "The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason," a fast-selling Norton paperback.

The 2004 hardcover headed toward best-seller lists when an atheistic New York Times reviewer proclaimed it an important book because it articulates



"Breaking the Spell" by Daniel C. Dennett

the dangers and absurdities of organized religion. However, the reviewer lamented Harris' old-fashioned belief in absolute rights and wrongs.

High culture fondness for skepticism continued when PEN, the authors' guild, honored Harris' screed with its 2005 nonfiction award.

Harris thinks religious faith is crazy. Mad. Psychotic. Delusional. A threat to the well-being and the very survival of humanity.

Much of this is simply asserted, rather like Psalm 14:1 in reverse. Harris seems ignorant of the substantial academic debate between atheists such as Dennett and God-defenders such as Richard Swinburne ("The Existence of God").

He directs special contempt at Islam and moderates in all religions that, he complains, foster extremism by making excuses for belief.

Harris irritated some atheists by following current spiritual fashion and endorsing Buddhist and other meditation forms that don't

involve God.

Harris' polemic appeared simultaneously with its polar opposite: "The Twilight of Atheism" (Doubleday) by

Oxford University's Alister McGrath, who was an atheist in his youth. McGrath enjoyed fewer hallelujahs than Harris.

One exception was Publishers Weekly, which found McGrath readable and memorable while dismissing Harris as ineffectual and sometimes simplistic and misguided.

McGrath freely acknowledged Christians' historical atrocities, a Harris complaint.

But, McGrath asserted, Nazi nihilists and Communist atheists did far worse when they gained power.

Harris gave the atheists' atrocities all of one sentence.

An afterword in the new paperback adds the inadequate argument that atheistic tyrants merely demonstrate dogmatism's dangers.

Dennett, a philosopher at Massachusetts' Tufts University, is a leader among thinkers who say Darwinian evolution should exterminate belief in God. Dennett pursues a different attack in "Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon" (Viking).

He applies Darwinism to faith, updating old claims that it results from a cultural version of natural selection. He

also scans scientific explanations for religion (which Harris is pursuing through doctoral work in neuroscience).

Unlike Harris, Dennett doesn't think people are idiots and says they expend time and treasure on religious belief because it provides apparent benefits.

He echoes Harris on religion's horrors but acknowledges that it provides believers a cornucopia of beauty to ravish their senses, whether Bach oratorios or Asian temples.

"It is hard to beat," he says.

He also sees growing evidence that religion improves adherents' physical health and morale.

However, Dennett insists, all religions are still false. And he sees no proof that believers are morally superior to skeptics. (Others disagree.) He calls nonbelievers bright, implying that believers are dim and darkened.

Though not all that convincing — Dennett candidly acknowledges such explanations are preliminary — "Breaking" is far superior to Harris' pop rant (praised by Dennett as brave).

Moreover, Dennett presents heady fare with breezy style rather than a professional philosopher's thorny rhetoric.

## BE PREPARED FOR DISASTERS

### Make an emergency plan

**DISCUSS** with household members, including children, how to respond to fire, severe weather, earthquakes and other emergencies.

**IDENTIFY** a family meeting place away from home but close to home, work and school.

**ARRANGE** an out-of-state phone contact person and keep this and other emergency phone numbers near each phone. Teach children when and how to call for help.

**LEARN** about hazards in the community and search for hazards in the home. Secure appliances and heavy furniture and move beds away from heavy mirrors and windows.

**FIND** out about special assistance that may be available if a family member is disabled.

**ASK** your children's teachers and caregivers about emergency plans for schools and day-care centers.

**HAVE** an additional wheelchair-accessible exit in case the primary one is blocked if someone in your household uses a wheelchair.

**IDENTIFY** safe places in your home and on your property. Plan and practice evacuation drills using two different escape routes from each room. Store a collapsible ladder on each upper level of your home.

**LEARN** how to turn off water, gas and electricity at main valves or switches. Turn off utilities only if you suspect lines are damaged or you are told to do so. Keep necessary tools near shut-off valves. If you turn off gas, you need a professional to turn it back on.

**LEARN** community evacuation routes.

**CHECK** insurance policies and make records of possessions.

**ASSEMBLE** important documents such as wills, insurance papers, medical records, inventory of possessions, identification and place them in a fire-proof/waterproof container. Add a family photo album to your emergency kit.

### Disaster supplies kit

Store in an easy-to-carry container such as a backpack or duffel bag. Include:

**THREE-DAY WATER SUPPLY** (1 gallon per person per day) stored in sealed, unbreakable containers. Identify storage date and replace every six months. A good way to remember is to change your water when you change your clocks.

**NONPERISHABLE FOODS** such as packaged, dried soups, canned food, peanut butter, crackers, evaporated or powdered milk, cereal and non-electric can opener.

**INFANT SUPPLIES**, if needed: disposable diapers, disposable bottles, formula etc.

**TOILETRY ITEMS** like toilet paper, wipes, soap, detergent, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, sanitary supplies

**PLASTIC GARBAGE BAGS** (orange or yellow make good visible signals). Large bags can be used as ponchos, ground covers or blankets.

**DISPOSABLE DISHES** and utensils.

**LARGE BUCKET** with tight-fitting lid to use as a toilet. Use bucket to store emergency tools like an axe, folding shovel and rope, pocket knife, cutlery whistle.

**CHANGE OF CLOTHING**, rain gear and sturdy shoes

**BLANKETS** or sleeping bags

**FIRST-AID KIT** that includes extra prescription medications, extra eyeglasses, bandages, sterile gauze pads, tape, scissors, tweezers, antibiotic ointment, hydrogen peroxide and over-the-counter pain pills

**BATTERY-POWERED RADIO**, flashlight and extra batteries

**CREDIT CARDS** and cash

**EXTRA SET** of car keys

**LIST** of family physicians and important family information: style and serial number of medical devices such as pacemakers

**SPECIAL ITEMS** for infants, elderly or disabled family members

**LEASH**, carrier and food for pet

**BOOKS**, small toys and cards

his basement office at the Emergency Operations Command Center in Franklin.

And, he warns, "Osama (bin Laden) would like nothing better than to hit the heartland."

Sutton talks of possible disasters not to scare people but to warn them to prepare for an unexpected emergency, whether it's natural or unnatural.

Every family should have a plan and an emergency kit so they can take care of themselves for three days, Sutton said.

Water, food, cash and a first-aid kit are the basics of an emergency kit.

In addition, every family should have a shelter in mind, whether in the basement or an interior room in the house, as well as designated shelter outside the home as a meeting place between school, home and work if the family becomes separated.

"Johnson County is probably very well prepared for any disaster, whether it's terrorism or natural," Sutton said. "But if it's big enough and bad enough, it takes time to get to everybody."

The emergency operations center is equipped to handle any

emergency, he said. It has a generator that would last a month, e-mail and a mobile command center, telephone line and cell, radio and satellite capability to coordinate emergency responders.

In case of an emergency, first responders work together as part of the National Incident Management System. These include:

- 42 certified emergency response team members
- 20 ham radio operators
- 20 animal-rescue team members
- 520 firefighters
- 342 law enforcement personnel
- 27 health department and hospital staff members
- Dozens of utility personnel.

"We are always training and planning," Sutton said.

Training events include a recent weather class. New equipment will be tested at a simulated terrorist-attack exercise April 29 in Whiteland.

"It's amazing. When something happens, it opens your eyes to what can happen to you," Jane Brewington said. "We take it to heart when the sirens go off. We watch and we listen. I don't ignore them anymore."

## • Disaster

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1)

thought about safety and the importance of being prepared for emergencies.

The Brewingtons now have an emergency bag stocked with first-aid equipment, powdered milk, canned food, can opener, water, batteries, flashlights, medications, matches and candles and two large carriers on wheels for their seven cats.

They also have thick plastic sheeting to close off a room in the event of a chemical spill or terrorist attack, a generator and a crank radio that works for two hours without a battery.

"Severe weather is our biggest threat," Sutton said. "Even a major rain can cause problems. We have flooding every year."

Terrorist attacks and earthquakes are also on the agenda of federal and state governments.

"The state feels that the New Madrid (earthquake) fault will be our Katrina," said Sutton, sitting in

## • Letters

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1)

asked a different class the same question. Same result.

High-end stationery reflects how the handwritten note has achieved a sense of cachet, a certain je-ne-sais-quoi that it never had before e-mail.

Julie Weiss, a graphic designer in New York City who creates unique invitations for affluent clients, compares it to a particularly stylish handbag that everyone wants because it's hard to get.

"I believe the handwritten note has become a status symbol, not unlike a vintage Hermes Birkin bag (they go for thousands, and there's a wait list) in fuschia," Weiss says.

"We get 100 e-mails a day, but a handwritten note only if we're special. The handwritten note is elitist and therefore a must for the fashion-conscious set. Of course, it must be written on fabulously heavyweight, monogrammed stationery."

Even those who aren't particularly status-conscious eventually realize there are moments when handwritten notes are a must. These include condolence letters, of course, or thank-you notes for an important gift. Or, as Susan Ross of Westport, Conn. found out, reply cards.

Ross, whose son will celebrate his bar mitzvah soon, wondered aloud to her stationer if there was a trend in asking for replies by e-mail.

"She looked at me with absolute disgust," Ross says.

Now, Ross is teaching 13-year-old William how to write thank-you notes.

"He was shocked that he couldn't do them on a computer," she said.

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