

# Bright star of the atheist universe

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Humorous and entertaining, Daniel Dennett is one of the few people able to do 'philosophy in public' – but when he comes to Dublin next week he'll be on a serious mission

WITH HIS flowing white beard and his twinkling demeanour he looks ever so slightly like Santa Claus, though he can be as scathingly witty as a stand-up comedian. He's also the sort of philosopher who writes articles in the New York Times, as opposed to the sort who lurks in university libraries muttering about the Critique of Pure Reason. Add to the list of qualities a mind sharper than a diamond-cut tack and you can understand why Daniel C Dennett is one of the best-known philosophers, humanists and cognitive scientists in the western world.

He has a gift for making philosophy accessible to a wide audience, which is why the Philosophers' Magazine describes him as one of "a regrettably small number of contemporary philosophers who are able to do philosophy in public, and to do it well". On the phone from Boston, where he is professor of philosophy and co-director of the Centre for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, Dennett chuckles at that description. It makes "doing philosophy in public" sound delightfully dodgy, he agrees, "sort of like being a porn star or something". He adds, however, that when he comes to Ireland this week to give a seminar called Taking the Place of Religion, there'll be nothing tricky about it, no philosophical sleight of hand, no conceptual striptease, no dances of the seven theological veils.

"I think a lot of people cling to religion because they think nothing can take its place," he says. "It's not so wonderful, but living without it would be terrible. Well, let's take a deep breath and look and see what might take its place. What does religion do really well? Are there any other institutions that might do it just as well, or better? Of course, the very idea that you might want to replace religion with anything fills a lot of people with fear and loathing and dismay. But that's because they've never thought about it."

Given current attitudes to institutional religion in Ireland it's likely that a lot of Irish people have been thinking about it a great deal. We're not, however, generally noted for our devotion to philosophy. So what, in Dennett's view, might the pursuit of philosophy do for us at this particular point – sticking point, some might say – in our sociocultural, political and financial history?

"The same job that philosophy has done very well over the centuries," he says. "And that is to clarify the conceptual innovations that come along as a result of the development of knowledge. Not just science, but knowledge in general. The philosopher's job is to help formulate the best questions to ask – and that's not easy."

According to Dennett the people who discover new ideas aren't necessarily the best people to examine those ideas. "They're too busy down in the trenches establishing the truth of, or the evidence for, an idea. The philosopher has the luxury, in effect, of being able to take a more bird's-eye view. The problem is that typically, in taking the bird's-eye view, they're up there in that rarefied air and they never get down close to the ground again. That's one of the familiar weaknesses of philosophy."

Dennett, by contrast, is well versed in bringing philosophy to a popular audience. A key element of his approach



is his liberal use of humour. Does he see this as a legitimate philosophical strategy?

“Actually I do,” he says. “And I know some philosophers seriously disagree with me on that. They think it’s somehow not playing fair. But I think it is exactly playing fair.

“The problems that philosophy faces are largely problems of blockades of imagination, where people just can’t get their heads around ideas, or won’t take seriously things that they ought to take seriously.”

It’s not that people can’t understand the arguments, he believes; it’s that their response, or lack of response, is driven by their emotions or by some unexamined assumption that underlies those emotions and that they are reluctant to exhume and examine.

“Patiently laying out a rigorous formal argument doesn’t do anything at all,” Dennett says. “People just don’t listen. They don’t pay attention. So if you can surprise them, if you can jolt them, if you can get them to laugh about it, then this loosens them up somewhat.

“Bertrand Russell once said people often mistakenly suppose that ‘humorous’ and ‘serious’ are antonyms. They’re not. ‘Humorous’ and ‘solemn’ are antonyms. I’m never more serious than when I’m being humorous.”

So is Dennett going to treat religion in a serious way, rather than just sending up its kitschier elements or setting up straw-man targets that can be effortlessly demolished?

“I’m going to ask,” he says, “from as neutral a standpoint as I can muster, what religions do that we might want to preserve, and what would we be happy to see go extinct. Suppose religions do go extinct, what could – or should – replace them? What steps could we take to preserve that which is worth preserving?

“I suppose the main point is that for many people, especially in the United States, the term ‘atheism’ has only negative connotations. It’s people who are against religion. Well, what are we for? What values do we share with the religious? What do we support, and how would we go about doing that?”

This sounds like an essentially liberal exercise or, at least, one that won’t appeal to religious fundamentalists.

“Essentially, yes, it’s liberal,” Dennett says. “Although there are a few ways in which I suppose it’s conservative. I think it would be nice to preserve, and conserve, some of the rituals and traditions of religion and put them to other uses. I’m all for ceremony: inaugurations and commencements and matriculation ceremonies and weddings, and so forth. These are all important. I think ritual is a nice thing, and it can play an important role in bringing people together.”

It’s not just in the US that atheism has negative connotations. The “new atheists” who have grabbed so many theological headlines in recent years, among them Christopher Hitchens, John Humphrys and Richard Dawkins, often give the impression of being grumpier than the most conscientious officer of the Spanish Inquisition. Dennett seems to be a happy atheist. He is, for instance, a supporter of the “bright” movement, which has tried to replace the rather po-faced term “atheist” with the more appealing “bright”, in the same way that the word “gay” has changed its meaning.

“I’m still a quiet supporter of the term ‘bright’,” he says. “I know it has achieved almost no applause from other humanists, but I think they’re being short-sighted. At least in the United States, it does important work. There was a brief flurry when Richard Dawkins and I wrote op-ed pieces, his in the Guardian, mine in the New York

Times, introducing the term. Neither one of us invented it, but we both pushed it for a while. Richard has sort of dropped it; I'm still happy to call myself a bright."

The standard objection is that the use of "bright" for atheists implies that religious people are dim, dull or both. But this, says Dennett, is not the intention at all. "After all, the opposite of 'gay' isn't 'glum'. It's 'straight'. And so I proposed that the opposite of 'bright' should be 'super'. They believe in the supernatural. We don't. They can be the supers and we can be the brights."

It's a good example of Dennett being serious while being humorous. But however seriously he may take it, the relationship of science and religion is a relatively recent interest for him. His main area of philosophical inquiry has been into what is often called the hottest topic in science: the question of consciousness. In his books and articles he has explored everything from evolutionary explanations to behavioural psychology, from artificial intelligence and computation to aesthetics and art criticism. "That's where my heart lies," he says. "Helping people see how the mind works."

It's a fair bet that, one way or another, his seminar will get a lot of minds working overtime.

### Curriculum vitae

- **Born** Boston, 1942.
- **Education** He studied philosophy first at Harvard, then at Oxford with Gilbert Ryle. He has been at Tufts University since 1971.
- **Work** His books include *Breaking the Spell* (Viking Penguin, 2006), *Freedom Evolves* (Viking Penguin, 2003) and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon Schuster, 1995). He has also co-authored books with Douglas Hofstadter and Alvin Plantinga.
- **Recreation** When not philosophising, or sailing, he spends his summers at his farm in Maine, where he harvests blueberries, hay and timber, and makes Normandy cider wine.

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Daniel C Dennett's seminar, *Taking the Place of Religion*, takes place at the D4 Berkeley Hotel in Dublin on Thursday at 7.30pm. See [seminars.ie](http://seminars.ie)

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