
DANIEL C. DENNETT RESPONDS

Richard Sosis, a major contributor to scientific research on religion, fears that my book may do more harm than good. Why? Because religious people who read it “will now look on [researchers on religion] with even greater distrust than they did before,” because they will find the tone of my book “insulting” and my arguments “unnecessarily belittling.” I am glad he has raised this issue so forcefully, because the tone of my book was not at all inadvertent; I thought long and hard about it, and test-

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flew versions with different groups of readers, making many adjustments along the way. The fact that, in his view, this process missed the mark so grievously actually underlines the main point of my title. As he says, “Maybe we have been under a spell to pursue our research with respect for the populations we work with . . . but I fear that breaking this spell, as Dennett has done, will only make our work more difficult.” He may be right, but I still don’t regret my choices.

If my book were an examination of the music world or the pharmaceutical industry, would its tone be insulting? I think not. I don’t think religious people have the right to any more respect than I would give to the leaders and followers in these important worlds, and I think the fact that the level of “respect” that Sosis says, correctly, is standardly

offered to believers is part of the problem. I set out to level the playing field. And of course, as he says, many religious people cannot stand the tone; I think they are more surprised than genuinely insulted—the very idea of somebody talking so candidly about the apparent irrationality of their professed creeds, and raising the prospect that they don’t really believe them but just profess them! Some religious readers (I have no idea what proportion, but it’s a heartening number) delight in confirming my suspicions. Others respond constructively to my candor without yet confirming my claims—they recognize that I am actually taking them seriously in a way I wouldn’t be doing if I mushed over the obvious problems with the usual layer of diplomatic formula.

I’m a believer in diplomacy whenever possible, and buttoning one’s lip when blurting out your convictions would seriously jeopardize your projects, but the line between valuable, defensible

diplomacy and self-subverting hypocrisy is hard to locate. Compare my position here to my position on Intelligent Design and fundamentalism. I have always disagreed with the position of the late Stephen Jay Gould and his successors, Michael Ruse and Eugenie Scott, who urge that evolutionary theory does not—need not—conflict with religious convictions. Nonsense! The conflict is huge, unless your religion is a highly sophisticated (one might say etiolated) metaphor-contraption. But I appreciate that those, like Eugenie Scott, who must face the opposition day in and day out, would often prefer that I

kept that opinion under wraps. Still, I believe that the cause of evolutionary biology is hurt by her “diplomacy” (and especially Michael Ruse’s) because it is so transparent—I think it persuades many religious people that evolutionists will lie to avoid a confrontation.

I also believe—here Sosis and I apparently disagree—that research on religion would improve if a less hyper-respectful tone were adopted. For one thing, the “distrust” of researchers by religious informants that Sosis acknowledges may well be due in large measure to their recognition of the insincerity of the respect they are paid (see my section

entitled “The Discreet Charm of the Anthropologist” in *Consciousness Explained* [Little Brown & Co., 1991]). For another, it is hard to say how many excellent would-be researchers on religion are repelled by the tone that currently dominates that literature. We need all the brilliant researchers we can field for this work. And, finally, I think that self-censorship by researchers very likely leads to neglecting the most pointed—and, hence, most fruitful—versions of some questions as yet unasked. But these are opinions about policy, not proven points, and I am eager to have Richard Sosis present the contrary case. **ff**
