

**Robert L. Park**

*Superstition: Belief in the Age of Science.*

Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010.

240 pages

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Park's book is a quick journey through the various supernatural beliefs that remain very popular today, including creationism, the afterlife, sundry new age beliefs and a plethora of medical treatments of a decidedly pseudoscientific flavor. In twelve rapid-fire chapters, Park uses humor, logic and insistence on evidence to explain and deflate each of those claims.

As Park observes near the start of this book: 'By 2006 there was at least one anti-religion title by a prominent scientist in the *New York Times* nonfiction best-seller list every week' (4). This gives rise to the question of what it is that Park's own book has, over and above these prior titles, to offer the general audience as well as—given the likely readership of this review—professional philosophers. The answer, unfortunately, is 'not much'.

It is not that Park's book is bad. Reading it is likely to provide a couple of afternoons of entertainment to someone who identifies with the Enlightenment tradition. Park considers many up-to-date examples of what Voltaire and the other philosophes would have immediately recognized as the 'superstition' that they were fighting, the breadth of the scope of his book providing a useful introduction to the issues for those who need one. Indeed, in reading Park it is possible to hear echoes of Voltaire's *Dictionary*.

It is also not that Park's book is unnecessary. As Park observes, superstition in many forms has managed to survive and sometimes even thrive in the age of science—despite the all too common hope of the *philosophes* that reason would deal it a deathblow. In the right hands, Park's book may serve to give shape to doubts that will lead the reader away from the kind of nonsense Park abhors.

As such, the book would make a fine gift for the skeptical colleague or a teenager who is trying to figure out how to think about the world. But, then, so would most of the other 'antireligion titles' to which Park alludes. Park's book fails to rise above the pack mainly because it shares with most of those titles a basic shortcoming.

Voltaire famously claimed: 'Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.' Despite some claims to be interested in understanding why it is that people still believe in the things they do, Park's book is mostly an expression of an understandably indignant exasperation at those absurdities and atrocities. Unfortunately, in railing against them, Park falls into the trap of thinking in Manichean terms of the struggle in which he participates—treating it as something like a cosmic battle between Reason and Superstition. Typical of this way of thinking is seeking to

explain human behavior in terms of adherence to reason or superstition, conceived of as motivating forces. In this, Park is in good company: many of the *philosophes* thought in those terms, as do many authors of today's anti-religion literature.

Yet this way of thinking of the conflict is singularly unhelpful and particularly inappropriate. It is inappropriate because it potentially denies the very naturalism that Park and the intellectual inheritors of the Enlightenment have developed. It is unhelpful because it makes it impossible to understand why it is that people—particularly intelligent, educated people—persist with the superstitions. When Park concludes (215) that '[s]cience is the only way of knowing—everything else is superstition', he gives stark expression to this dualist vision.

In *Breaking the Spell* (Viking Press, 2006), Daniel Dennett calls for atheists and humanists to go beyond merely criticizing religion and to make the effort to understand it as a natural phenomenon. While he has been rightly criticized for phrasing his challenge in a way that ignores existing research into religious behavior, Dennett's basic point is both correct and profound. Both reason and superstition (however broadly either of those terms is understood) are products of human cognitive and cultural systems. Understanding how it is that these systems sometimes produce one and sometimes the other is essential to knowing where to direct efforts aimed at changing the balance between them as well as knowing what the effects of such policy are likely to be. It is also key to explicitly avoiding the anti-naturalist reification of reason and superstition.

Park does offer some explanations for why people believe in various supernatural claims. However, the explanations he offers are the offhand kind that have been making the rounds in atheist literature for decades or even centuries but which often actually have very little basis in empirical evidence. A case in point is Park's claim that a child comes to believe superstitions due to being a 'blank slate' that is receptive to all manner of useful as well as useless beliefs (187). This claim is also made by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (Bantam Books, 2006), but any developmental psychologist will likely deny it and point to research showing that children from a very early age are quite canny about whom they trust and about what.

In Park's case part of the problem lies with his attitude toward the 'soft sciences' that can explain why people believe supernatural claims. After explaining the traditional disdain physicists such as he have had for psychology, Park brings up neuroscience as the means by which psychology is becoming a worthy 'hard science' (198). Tellingly, however, he remains silent concerning his own disdain for any bit of psychology that does not involve fMRI studies. Or, for that matter, for any other of the 'soft sciences' that offer only the 'subjective study of human behavior'. Park exemplifies the other side of the physicist's disdainful view of 'soft science' when he offers naively simple solutions to complex questions from sociology. Thus, for example, he claims that low fertility rates and prosperity are both caused by women's rights (212), thereby 'solving' the issue of the demographic transition that sociologists have been studying for generations. His solution has the difficulty, however, that in many societies such as France the effects preceded the purported cause by many decades—as any soft sociologist could have pointed out to

Park.

In the case of Voltaire and his contemporaries, treating reason and superstition as explanatory factors rather than as complex social/cognitive phenomena to be explained by scientific research is very much to be excused, given that the necessary research was scarcely to be dreamt of at the time. The same cannot be said of Park, however. He writes at a time when the scientific study of religion is undergoing a renaissance with cultural, cognitive and evolutionary approaches coming together to provide novel and powerful explanations of the various phenomena that form religious and magical traditions. Made possible by the evolutionary turn in social sciences, cognitive science of religion is one of the hottest areas of current-day research, not that you'd know this reading Park.

Clearly, it is possible to fall for unconsidered tropes when arguing for reason. Still, Park didn't need to reach for the modern science of religion to have written a better book. When writing from personal experience, as he does in some of the vignettes interspersed throughout the book, he shows an appreciation of the complexity of the human condition that goes far beyond easy solutions and easy divisions, without denying the existence of a profound conflict between scientific and religious attitudes and traditions. It is a pity Park did not draw more extensively upon that store of non-scientific knowledge.

**Konrad Talmont-Kaminski**

Institute of Philosophy, Marie Curie-Sklodowska University