I listen to all these complaints about rudeness and intemperateness, and the opinion that I come to is that there is no polite way of asking somebody: have you considered the possibility that your entire life has been devoted to a delusion? But that’s a good question to ask. Of course we should ask that question and of course it’s going to offend people. Tough.

Thank goodness for Dan

JULIAN BAGGINI MEETS THE LEAST APOCALYPTIC OF THE FOUR HORSEMEN

Conquest, war, famine and death. It’s an interesting parlour game to decide which of the new atheism’s “four horsemen” - Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens - best corresponds to their apocalyptic namesakes. More than one is combative, and more than one seeks to conquer religion once and for all, if not to kill it. Less charitably, you might also say that at times, some have a rather malnourished understanding of what religion actually is.

The game lacks a credible conclusion though, because at least one horseman just won’t fit the eschatological mould. Dan Dennett is certainly capable of pugnacious argument, but he’s more of a wrestler than a boxer, a person who truly grapples with his opponent, even as he tries to get them in a headlock and slam them to the floor.

That’s why his major contribution to the recent new atheism debate, his book Breaking the Spell, is often hailed as the most thoughtful and intelligent. Dennett acknowledges the differences, but is at pains to defend those who take a different approach.

“I don’t object to being lumped in with the others. I don’t think, well, I was doing it the moral way and they were doing it the immoral way, or I was doing it the polite way, they were doing it the impolite way. I don’t think that’s right slightly different strategies. All necessary been there, different reached."

Breaking the that religion is should study it the natural work protected zone respect. Having Dennett neither
think that’s right. I think we all adopted slightly different but defensible strategies. All four approaches are necessary because there are different people out there, different audiences that have to be reached."

*Breaking the Spell*’s central argument is not that religion is wrong or wicked, but that we should study it just as we do any other aspect of the natural world. It should not be in a kind of protected zone, ring-fenced by excessive respect. Having thus opened up religion, Dennett neither tries to be offensive nor shy away from saying things he know will offend some. His strategy is simply to avoid giving anyone an excuse to use that offence as a reason not to engage with his arguments.

“I thought people were still going to throw the book across the room, but I didn’t want to give them an excuse to throw the book across the room. I wanted them to feel a little bit bad about their throwing it across the room, maybe go and retrieve it and think well, hang on, yes, 

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this irritated me but maybe I don’t have the right to be irritated.

“I doubt that sentiment would occur to somebody who threw Christopher’s or Richard’s book across the room. That’s alright, because there are different spectra of responsiveness out there and you want to cover the bases. For some people I think the shot across the bows from Christopher Hitchens is exactly what they need, what they deserve.

“Let’s take the group that you might think were my natural audience. These are thoughtful, well-meaning, say, Christians, who are believers, are church-goers, who think everything they’re doing is just wonderful. They think religion is good, they know there are some problems, but not for their church, not for their way of being religious. So you might think my book is ideal for them in that I am respectful and get them gently to think about some of the things. But I think it’s very important for them also to read Christopher Hitchens’s book and realise just how bad things are out there in some areas, and see that this man, somebody who knows so much about it, is this angry, and that’s an important fact.”

Dennett goes further, defending his fellow horsemen against the charge that they are rude or intemperate.

“I listen to all these complaints about rudeness and intemperateness, and the opinion that I come to is that there is no polite way of asking somebody: have you considered the possibility that your entire life has been devoted to a delusion? But that’s a good question to ask. Of course we should ask that question and of course it’s going to offend people. Tough.”

Still, isn’t it the case that you can choose your words carefully? Telling someone their faith is mistaken is one thing, saying it’s a delusion quite another.

“Well let’s compare it to some other cases. Think of how horrible it would be to have to go around and tell people they had been taken in by Bernie Madoff. Think of the pain of learning that you’ve been made a complete fool of by Bernie Madoff. Do we have to tell those people? Yes. Do we really? Well, yeah, they’ve lost everything and we have to tell them and no matter how we tell them they’re going to feel rotten. Now why isn’t it like that?”

Because in the Bernie Madoff case, they can’t hide from the facts, they’re going to find out eventually that they haven’t got their money any more. In the case of a religion you have a job of persuasion to do, presumably so believers can moderate their views or give them up. If you say to somebody, you basically believe things which no sensible, objective rational person could possibly believe. I don’t think you’re going to get as far as if you say, look, I can see you’re committed to truth, take a look at your view as truthfully as you can. Now, can’t you see this, this and this? That seems to be the approach Dennett takes.

“Well, yeah, fair enough. I think a better parallel would be what if we could have gone round to Bernie Madoff’s clients beforehand, before the denouncement. There was that accountant who was desperately trying to get the Securities and Exchange Commission to blow the whistle. He wasn’t going round talking to individual clients and if he had it would have been extremely painful and they would have probably kicked him out of the house.
How should he have approached them? With a sort of brusque wake-up wake-up you're being made a fool of, or gentle-gentle-gentle? It's not clear. Some people need a pill of cold water in the face and some people need very gentle treatment.

But the balance at the moment seems to me to be too far tilted on the side of the bucket of water, and people saying 'you're a deluded fool who's been taken in by something no sensible person should be taken in by if they looked at the evidence for five minutes,' is not going to be as conducive as saying, 'it's perfectly understandable to be taken in by this but actually, it is a mistake and let me show you why.' I think that the second approach is surely, most of the time, a more constructive one than the other.

"Well, I think that's right and I think maybe in a way that's what I was trying to do. But what's the downside of doing it my way? The downside of doing it my way is falling to galvanise people at all - then it's a failure.

The fear I have, as a fellow traveller, is the perception people now have of atheists is the one I thought we were trying to shake off, which is that atheists are very, very self-confident, virulently anti-religious people, who don't have anything to do in the mornings unless they can wake up and bash a bishop or two, metaphorically. This is not just a tactical matter: there's also a kind of lack of integrity about it. There's something inappropriate about an atheist having too much self-confidence in their own ability to see the truth through reason.

If you have a commitment to reason, and Hume is one of your great heroes - as he is for many atheists - the first thing you know about reason is that it's fragile thing. Also, you learn just a tiny bit of psychology and you recognise how easy it is for us to co-opt reason to justify what we already think. Given that, isn't there too much of a desire on the side of atheists to claim reason for themselves and trust they are fully fit to use it?

"Well, since I've just debated Alvin Plantinga [the leading Christian philosopher] at the APA meeting in Chicago, you're not going to find me very sympathetic to this line, because I find the presumption of reasonableness in his work and the other philosophers of religion to be unimpressive. I've got to say."

Or, in a formulation Dennett endorses, you can take the principle of charity too far.

Another criticism of the new atheism is that it places too much stress on the metaphysics. In other words, many find it quite straightforward to show that the traditional religious metaphysics is nonsense, there are no souls, no heaven and so forth. But isn't it mistaken to think that, once you've established that, religion is blown out of the water? Isn't it the case that actually, in a way, such beliefs may not even be the most important thing about religion?

"I think that's exactly right. That's why I spend so little time on the metaphysics. I deliberately spent hardly any time at all on whether there were any good arguments for the existence of God. Fortunately, Richard spent a lot of time on that and I endorsed what he had to say pretty much down the line and it saved me the trouble.

"I talk to religious people and almost everyone I talked to said it wasn't about proof or disproof in the belief in God. It wasn't about dogma at all. I took them at their word, I
thought that was right. What it was about was, as I call it, belief-in-belief. And that is what it is about: the behaviours, the professing, the going through the motions—that's what's interesting, that people still want to do that. Why they do want to do that is not clear, that's what we have to find out, but we're certainly looking in the wrong place if we look at arguments for or against of one kind of god or another. I think that's missing the point entirely."

But is it belief-in-belief as much as belief in praxis: the life of religion, rather than the thought? That's what a lot of intellectuals who want to defend religion have argued recently, most publicly and repeatedly, Karen Armstrong.

"That's a very sophisticated view and it may be too sophisticated by half. It only works so long as there are some people who still really believe in it. If it's all just praxis, if we're all just going through the motions, then something's been lost.

"Last night we were talking about saying Latin grace at high table at an Oxford College. It's a charming old ritual—that's all it is. I think we could welcome the evaporation of all the dogmatic steam out of religion, so we were just left with the ritualistic shells. That would be a good thing. But if that happened, then of course the question is, would the ritualistic shells still do the work of binding together communities. And I think it would, actually. I think people may take an oath before they testify and it works, I think it's important. I don't think it has anything to do with believing in God, or believing that the book you're putting your hand on is anything but

I wanted people to feel a little bit bad about throwing my book across the room

just a prop. When people say their wedding vows, when they go through graduation ceremonies and commencement exercises, I think all of these ceremonies work without there having to be any real dogma behind them. They are auspicious occasions, they're formal, they're official, and I think that the behaviour enjoined at them, the fact that you are not supposed to be flippant, that you're supposed to be respectful, take it seriously, this is all important."

But with religion, isn't it inevitably going to be the case that if you have these rituals, people are going to be more religious than believing it. Cerebral are a ritual thing

"Yeah, I think of Owen Flanagan's great deal. Catholicism is just saying, ok if you context: if asserting that but, as I pointed out, people don't grasp to tell them. Going to say morning so understand don't say prepared to defendable.

There's Surely their gains in the things who very nature rather less in atheism written yet look at that with the
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famously advocated just getting on with being
religious as the best way to end up sincerely
believing it. Only the most self-conscious and
cerebral are going to be able to have this "it's just
a ritual" thing in their heads.

"Yeah, I've just written about this in a review
of Owen Flanagan's new book, which I admire a
great deal. He's a former choir boy, he had a
Catholic upbringing and he loves all the
Catholic rituals, and he doesn't believe a word of
it, of course. He draws a distinction -- which I
don't buy or I'm very worried about -- between
two kinds of saying: saying it and meaning it; and
just saying it in a ceremonial context. He says it's
ok if you say these things in the ceremonial
context: that's defensible in a way in that
asserting these things is not. That's all very well,
but, as I point out in the review, what about the
naive people, what about the children? They
don't grasp that distinction and you're not going
to tell them the distinction. The minister isn't
gonna say "Oh by the way, everything I say this
morning from this pulpit has got to be
understood as in a ceremonial context," no, you
don't say that, and I think since you're not
prepared to say that, it isn't, in fact, entirely
defensible."

There's a baby and bathwater question too.
Surely there are going to be real losses as well as
gains in giving up religion. There are certain
things which are good and for which there is a
very natural mode of expression in religion, and
rather less natural modes of expression of them
in atheism. Ron Aronson, for instance, has
written very eloquently about gratitude. If you
look at the secularised culture we have, it seems
that with the loss of religious rituals, rituals of
grace and prayer, there is more of a sense of
entitlement, less of a sense of gratitude. Don't
we have to be very careful when we reject
religion that we don't chuck out the things that
are good about it?

"I think that's true. I think that's right. Did
you see my piece after my heart operation, a
piece called 'Thank Goodness!'? This was after I
had a heart operation where I nearly died, and
people were wondering whether I'd had any
epiphanies, and I said that I did: that when I say
'thank goodness' that's not just a euphemism for
'thank God'; I really mean it. I mean thank
goodness, I'm very grateful. There's a lot of
goodness around me that my continued existence
depended on very definitely and God didn't have
anything to do with it. It's people and institutions,
there's medicine and science, and particular
doctors and nurses and hospitals and friends and
family and I'm very grateful for them.

"I suppose my favourite line in it was when I
said I excused those who said they prayed for me
and I resisted the temptation to say, 'well thank
you very much but did you also sacrifice a goat?'
Because did you think that the praying was any
more efficacious than sacrificing a goat or any
less postperous? I don't. You're saying you
prayed for me and I understand you said that
with good intention, but if you really wanted to
help, there were other things you could have
done and the delusion that this somehow
helped, I reject that."

He may be miscast as an apocalyptic
horseman, but Dennett is clearly no avuncular
tame atheist either. In a debate hampered by
lack of respect or far too much of the
uncearned variety, Dennett gives as much as
is due, and no more.