

The New Atheist Movement is destructive

The antitheism of the four horsemen is for me a backwards step. It reinforces what I believe is a myth, that an atheist without a bishop to bash is like a fish without water, Julian Baggini writes.

Text: Julian Baggini

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“What do you think about the four horsemen?” It's a question I often get asked, quite understandably, since I wrote the Very Short Introduction to atheism. That book provides no answer, because it came out before Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens unleashed their apocalypse. But surely I must have an opinion on the biggest phenomenon in popular atheism since Bertrand Russell?

Well I do, but it comes with one huge caveat: I have not read any of their books. That does not, however, disqualify me from having an opinion about them. Let me defend both apparently intellectually disreputable confessions.

Not reading *The God Delusion*, *God is Not Great*, *Breaking the Spell* and *The End of Faith* is perfectly reasonable. Why on earth would I devote precious reading hours to books which largely tell me what I already believe? These books are surely mainly for agnostics and open-minded believers. In fact, I think atheists who have read these books have more of a responsibility to account for their actions than I do my inaction. As the posters on the sides of British buses rather simplistically put it, “There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” God's non-existence is a fact atheists live with, not something that they should obsessively read about.

But if I haven't read these books, surely I should have no opinion about them? I think you'd be less sure of this if you had read *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* by Pierre Bayard (or even not read it). In any case, my opinions are not so much about these books as the general tone and direction the new atheism they represent has adopted. This is not a function of what exactly these books say, but of how they are perceived, and the kind of comments the four horsemen make in newspaper articles and interviews. All this, I think, has been unhelpful in many ways. In short, the new atheism gets atheism wrong, gets religion wrong, and is counterproductive.

How does it get atheism wrong? When I wrote my own book on the subject, I believed that atheism was widely misunderstood as being primarily a negative attack on religious belief, on which it is parasitic.

But this can't be right. Imagine for one moment that atheism triumphs and belief in God is eradicated. On the view that atheism needs religion, then this victory would also be atheism's extinction. This is absurd.

It is only because of historical accident that atheism is not widely recognised as a world-view in its own right. This world view is essentially a very general form of naturalism, in which there are not two kinds of stuff, the natural and the supernatural, but one. The forces that govern this substance are also natural ones and there is no ultimate purpose or agency behind them. Human life is biological, and thus does not survive beyond biological death.

Such a worldview needs defending, and a special name, only because for various reasons, it is not the one that most humans have adopted. But the view itself is true whether or not there are people who disagree with it. In a totally atheist world, we may stop noticing that it is a view at all, in the same way that most people do not notice that they believe objects exist whether we perceive them or not. But it would still be a view.

So in my book, I tried to articulate the grounds for this view with as little reference to the religious alternative as possible. The new atheism, however, is characterised by its attacks on religion. “There is a logical path from religious faith to evil deeds,” wrote Richard Dawkins, quite typically, quoting approvingly Stephen Weinberg, who said, “for good people to do evil things, it takes religion.” Hitchens goes so far as to explicitly say that “I am not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist.” This antitheism is for me a backwards step. It reinforces what I believe is a myth, that an atheist without a bishop to bash is like a fish without water. Worse, it raises the possibility that as a matter of fact, for many atheists, they do indeed need an enemy to give them their identity.

A second feature of atheism is that it is committed to the appropriate use of reason and evidence. In order to occupy this intellectual high ground, it is important to recognise the limits of reason, and also to acknowledge that atheists have no monopoly on it. The new atheism, however, tends to claim reason as a decisive combatant on its side only. With its talk of “spells” and “delusions”, it gives the impression that only through stupidity or crass disregard for reason could anyone be anything other than an atheist. “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence,” says Dawkins, once again implying that reason and evidence are strangers to religion. This is arrogant, and attributes to reason a power it does not have.

This is most evident when you consider the poverty of the new atheism’s “error theory”, which is needed to explain why, if atheism is indeed the view evidence and reason demands, so many very bright people are still religious. The usual answers given to this are not good enough. They tend to stress psychological blind-spots and wishful thinking. For instance, Dawkins says “the meme for blind faith secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational inquiry.”

But if very intelligent people are so easily led astray by such things, then shouldn’t the new atheists themselves be more sceptical about the role reason plays in their own belief formation? You cannot, on the one hand, put forward a view that says great intelligence is easily over-ridden by psychological delusions and, on the other, claim that one unique group of people can see clearly what reason demands and free themselves from such grips. Either many religious people are not as irrational as they seem, or atheists are not entitled to assume they are as rational as they seem to themselves.

I also think the new atheism tends to get religion wrong. The focus is always on the out-dated metaphysics of religion, its belief in personal creator gods, miracles, souls and so forth. I have no doubt that the vast majority of the religious do indeed believe in such things. Indeed, I'm on the record as accusing liberal theologians of hiding behind their less literalist interpretations, and pretending that matters of creed don't really matter at all.

However, there is much more to religion than the metaphysics. To give a non-exhaustive list, religion is also about trying to live *sub specie aeternitatis*; orienting oneself to the transcendent rather than the immanent; living in a moral community of shared practice or as part of a valuable tradition; cultivating certain attitudes, such as gratitude and humility; and so on. To say, as Sam Harris does, that "religion is nothing more than bad concepts held in place of good ones for all time" misses all this. The practices of religion may be more important than the narratives, even if people believe those narratives to be true.

The new atheism has also, I think, created an unhelpful climate for atheism to flourish. When people think of atheists now, they think about men who look only to science for answers, are dismissive of religion and over-confident in their own rightness. Richard Dawkins, for example, presented a television programme on religion called *The Root of all Evil* and has as his website slogan "A clear thinking oasis". Where is the balance and modesty in such rhetoric?

For me, atheism's roots are in a sober and modest assessment of where reason and evidence lead us. That means the real enemy is not religion as such, but any kind of system of belief that does not respect these limits on our thinking. For that reason, I want to engage with thoughtful, intelligent believers, and isolate extremists. But if we demonise all religion, such coalitions of the reasonable are not possible. Instead, we are likely to see moderate religious believers join ranks with fundamentalists, the enemies of their enemy, to resist what they see as an attempt to wipe out all forms of religious belief.

Constructive engagement can yield good results. For example, in the UK, the Accord Coalition has been formed to resist the spread of religious schools. Its members include the Hindu Academy, a Christian think-tank, Ekklesia, and The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement.

It is sometimes argued that this kind of desire for engagement with moderates is dangerous, since the liberals merely provide cover for the extremists. I find this as unpersuasive as the argument that talking to democratic socialists only encourages the communists, or that negotiating with Fatah is a sop to jihadists. The best way to disrupt such continuities as there are between moderates and extremists is to encourage them to see the greater continuities they have with moderates they disagree with.

For these reasons, I am not happy about the public rhetoric of the new atheism, which has the most powerful effect on how people perceive people like me. Anyone committed to the proper use of reason and evidence should use both to see that this rhetoric matters, whether they like it or not, and modify their approach accordingly.

Atheists should be allowed to argue their case

The new atheists' principal fault would seem to be failure to abide by the rule that demands "respect for religion", philosopher George Williamson claims. He strongly disagrees with Julian Baggini's assertion that the new atheism-movement is counter-productive.

Text: George Williamson
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Julian Baggini's recent opinion piece, "The New Atheist Movement is Destructive", strings together a series of flimsy claims and a general eschewal of the requirements of accuracy and relevance in criticizing the new atheists, to lead to a conclusion that, while truly extraordinary given the briefest glance at history, is unfortunately all-too-typical of such criticism.

First, a methodological quibble. Pointing out that he has not read the books of the new atheists, Mr. Baggini argues that this does not disqualify him from opining about them. He need not read the books, he claims, since they would only tell him what he already believes and could only be addressed to agnostics and open-minded believers. I confess to doing much the same thing, though not for the same reasons. For something like a text book or an introduction to atheism, I feel confident in passing over them, not because I expect to believe everything in them but because I expect they will provide no new information to me. But that is based on having looked at dozens of them and found them to be much of a piece.

The books by Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris are not just freshman texts in philosophy of religion though, something Mr. Baggini cannot know without at least cracking a cover. I can vouch for two of the books, Dennett's and Dawkins' – I haven't read the other two, so I couldn't say, and will hereafter confine my remarks (tacitly) to the two new atheists mentioned. Neither Dennett's book nor Dawkins' contains an atheist manifesto, listing only things every atheist believes, or a Cole's Notes summary for philosophy of religion.

Still, I wouldn't force Mr. Baggini to read anything he regards as a waste of time. And fortunately, when he turns to justifying his right to an opinion, it turns out the books he has not read are not actually the subject of his critique anyway. After a brief reference to Bayard's book to support his claims – a book I find in the Humour section of my bookstore, by the way – he redirects his criticisms to "the general tone and direction [of] the new atheism", "how [the new atheists] are perceived" and "the kind of comments the four horsemen make in newspaper articles and interviews".

I am uncertain whether I should bother to point out that criticising 'general impressions' of such phenomena is inevitably superficial and highly questionable, unless one can comment on their accuracy and relevance, which would require Mr. Baggini to have better information than simple 'perceptions'. Surely this seems too obvious a concern.

However, I would not prevent Mr. Baggini from discussing these general perceptions and impressions all he likes. Had the rest of his article been this scrupulous, there would be no issue between us. For he quickly moves on from these, to attribute faults to the new atheists themselves, attributions which his admitted information cannot support. If he had stuck with criticising perceptions, his apparent point, that the perception of the new atheism, not the new atheism itself, is counter-productive, would be indisputable, in my view.

No such scruples. He proposes to combat the misunderstanding that atheism is “a negative attack on religious belief”, and so, is ‘parasitic’ upon religion. The new atheists are at fault, he says, for lending credence to this myth.

Again, I can’t imagine that this really needs to be said, but the case here seems to turn on an ambiguity in ‘negative’. ‘Atheism’ is a negative term (constructed by negation of ‘theism’), and, bound in opposition to ‘theism’, I suppose that makes it ‘parasitic’ (though this term also lends an undue pejorative connotation). But being negative in this sense means only ‘being opposed to’, and it is unclear how Mr. Baggini gets from this to ‘attack’. Precious little of what follows justifies concluding that ‘negative’ also means that the new atheist’s are doing something bad, destructive, or even unproductive.

If criticism may be termed an ‘attack’ on religion, the new atheism is guilty as charged. But criticism may be justified or unjustified, better or worse in a hundred ways. There’s no way around atheism opposing religion, but nothing Mr. Baggini says makes clear that it does so in an objectionable way.

Perhaps the answer lies in Mr. Baggini’s complaints of the new atheists’ use of reason and evidence. The new atheists “claim reason as a decisive combatant on [their] side only”, and must “recognise the limits of reason” and “acknowledge that atheists have no monopoly on it”.

That they might claim reason for their own is implausible, considering the diligence and detail in which they have scrutinized the reasoning and evidence of their theist opponents, whose books they appear to have bothered to read, in spite of the likelihood that they have seen much of the same calibre. But the new atheists go on from this examination to assert, on the strength of reason and evidence, that their case is the better supported.

This is hardly ‘claiming a monopoly on reason’, nor can it reasonably be transgressing the limits of reason – it is only being intellectually responsible enough to draw the warranted conclusions.

I also find nowhere that the new atheists contrast reason and intelligence with religious belief. Mr. Baggini suggests that the spectre of the highly intelligent believer ought to give the new atheists pause, to make them “more sceptical about the role reason plays in their own belief formation”.

But the fact that intelligence is not infallible does not justify any general skepticism about reason. In any case, what would it mean to ‘be more skeptical’ about reason? ‘Being skeptical’ itself only means taking care to scrutinize the justification for a claim before believing it. That’s not any different from the appropriate use of reason in the first place.

What then is Mr. Baggini asking the new atheists to do? Check it twice, à la Santa Claus? And again, if this reflection should make anyone unsure of their conclusions, surely it would have the more general effect of undermining the capacity of reason to lend support to any conclusion.

Are we now required to be skeptical and tentative of conclusions carefully worked out and supported by the best reason we can manage, so as not to appear arrogant to believers in the opposite conclusion, even if they support their conclusions with nothing better than supposition and declarations of faith?

Really, there is no special use of reason that counts as recognizing the limits of reason or acknowledging that you have no monopoly on it. There is just the use of reason to diligently support your claims and to attend appropriately to criticism. Mr. Baggini has supplied no evidence that the new atheists fail in this.

But surely I have overlooked the main staple of his case, the damning quotations by the new atheists themselves? Yes, Mr. Baggini does adduce the words of the new atheists against the new atheism, and I do not doubt that quotations can be found in which the new atheists fail to represent their own views in the best light and the blame for any resultant ‘bad odor’ they find themselves in should fall squarely on their own heads.

But even the quotes Mr. Baggini employs are not unequivocally of this character. Some could be understood as factual claims, as when Dawkins is quoted as saying, “faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence”.

As near as I can tell, believers all-but-explicitly regard their faith as exempting them of the burden of providing evidence, if not in the first instance, then at least in the last. Calling this a cop-out may not be welcome, but is it worse than ‘calling a spade a spade’?

Believers may be unhappy to hear that religion is behind a lion’s share of the world’s wars, but this doesn’t make it less the truth. Further, not all of the quotes clearly support Mr. Baggini’s claims. He makes much of the ‘arrogance’ of Dawkins’ website slogan, “a clear thinking oasis”, which really seems a bland claim to provide careful, reasoned thought.

He appears to misunderstand Dawkins’ comment on ‘the meme for blind faith’ as asserting an ‘error theory’ concerned with ‘psychological blind-spots’. The only connection here seems to turn on the presence of the word ‘blind’ in both, a fact that Mr. Baggini may discover at the small cost of actually reading Dawkins’ book.

There is simply too much wrong in Mr. Baggini’s article to cover here, so let me cut to the chase and sum up what seems to be the gist of his concerns, in light of my criticisms thus far.

The only strength of his case rests on finding the new atheists’ saying objectionable things in the press: as I have pointed out, he has failed to show that there is anything wrong with their opposition to religion or their reliance on reason, and he is in poor position to reply or to further support his claims without better grounds than the ‘perception’ of the new atheism.

Given that, it seems to me that his complaint in sum is this: tactless and harsh comments in the media by new atheists have soured the otherwise benign, friendly atmosphere in which believers and non-believers usually meet.

So, although religious believers have persecuted and murdered atheists, and anyone else who disagreed with them; while religion has happily promoted genocide, slavery, the oppression of women and other races, sexual repression and the use of force to ensure conformity (this being only what the Bible flat-out recommends); and while religious authorities have fought tooth and nail the liberalization of our ethics and politics, to say nothing of steadfastly opposing progress in scientific knowledge and technical ability, what is really counter-productive is that atheists have the temerity to think their tendency to base belief in reason means they might have something to say about the truth of matters, and are downright arrogant in expecting those who disagree with their conclusions to do so on reasoned grounds.

Unfortunately, I must admit that this makes sense, in a certain context, a context which is our present one. Given the general presumption of the righteousness of religion, simply mentioning that one is an atheist already gives offense.

It seems quite clear that in the eyes of many, including some atheists, the only acceptable way to be an atheist is to shut up about it and not disturb believers' complacent presumption of their unassailable metaphysical and moral position, their conviction that anyone who could oppose governance by their religious principles must surely be beyond the pale, if not actually evil.

The new atheists' principal fault would seem to be failure to abide by this. But there has never been a congenial relationship between believers and non-believers to be spoiled. The fault for this, though, must belong to religion, given its historical track record for aggression toward dissent. Maybe the new atheists are arrogant, but so far, no one has been burned at the stake for apostasy from reason.

But surely Mr. Baggini is not following in this line – he's an atheist, new or old, himself. No, his concern is to not alienate the moderate believer. On this I have little to say – I have no idea as to how one makes rapprochement with religious moderates, nor even what value doing so might have for atheists.

This is a thorny political problem for greater minds than mine. But it seems to me that what is moderate about a believer is rarely their religion. Rather, their moderateness is so to the extent of their secularity, to the extent that they are not religious.

It is to modern, secularized culture that we must attribute this moderation, for the religious get their values and beliefs overwhelmingly from this source, same as the rest of us. Perhaps this suggests that atheists should press the case for a secular world with renewed vigour, though that will predictably dump further displeasure on them. All the same, I can only wonder what use compromise with religion could be to atheists, apart from deflecting a small amount of the hostility directed their way.

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