

## BOOK REVIEW

## AN EMOTIONAL HISTORY OF DOUBT

**An Emotional History of Doubt.** By Alec Ryrie. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2019. 262 pp. \$27.95.

The standard genesis of modern western atheism, recently highlighted by the emergence of the likes of (who else?) Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, et al., sees it as the product, first of the Renaissance and its celebration of pre-Christian antiquity, most notably the influence of the work of Epicurus and Lucretius. More to the point, historians generally stress the rise of science and the Enlightenment as a whole, with the usual suspects such as Spinoza, Voltaire, Diderot, Hume, and the Utilitarians, culminating inevitably in Nietzsche. But Ryrie, Professor of the History of Science at Durham University (and a self-confessed “believer with a soft spot for atheism”), tries a different approach. He takes as his epigraph Julian Barnes’s remark in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), “Most of us, I suspect... make an instinctive decision, then build up an infrastructure of reason to justify it. And call the result common sense.” In other words, the progression to both belief and unbelief is not a rational venture, an orderly kind of religious—or anti-religious—sorites, but an instinctual, emotional development, for which we later build one of Barnes’s

sincere, but after the fact rational explanations.

More specifically, Ryrie traces the rise of atheism in northern Europe to the Reformers’ attack on Catholic orthodoxy and practice. Nowhere was fusillade of criticism and creative innovation more intense (and, at times, more bizarre) than in England; so Ryrie concentrates on English theologians and churchmen in the late sixteenth century and the turbulent period of 1640 to 1660 (with its sometimes antic cast of Levelers, Ranters, Quakers, Fifth Monarchists, Muggletonians, etc.). And could this have been a major line of thought leading to the death of God?

Contrary to the contemptuous, mocking stance and tone of today’s atheists, he looks for the roots of atheism not in cold-eyed militant secularism or aggressive rationalism, but in “two interwoven emotional stories, of *anger* and *anxiety*.” His case, more sketched out than minutely developed a mere 200 pages here seems to make *prima facie* case that the proverbial oceans of ink spilled in recent centuries by writers vehemently trying but failing to settle once and for all the question of God’s existence show us that this is not primarily an intellectual enterprise? Tastes are deeply felt sensations; and the old saw still holds, *De gustibus non est disputandum*. And the New Atheists haven’t even managed to impress many academic philosophers, who hold their popularizing brethren in mild, or not so mild, disdain.

Perhaps they just don't want their atheism *that shaggy*.

The Protestant Reformation unleashed a tsunami of anger, in language often both furious and foul, against the corrupt beliefs and practices of Rome—and before too long those of competing denominations as well. From there it was a logical leap to attack the very Deity presiding over the whole scheme, though writers couldn't say that out loud for many years.

Anxiety, says Ryrie, originally derived from “the unsettling, reluctant inability to keep a firm grip” on doctrines consciously believed to be true. Descartes (unmentioned by Ryrie) used his methodical doubt like a sort of well-trained retriever, who could track down and capture difficult issues, without ever getting violent about it. (There was no way his supposedly unsparing methodical doubt was going to destroy the Holy of Holies.) But the hounds of later religious philosophers were a fiercer breed of hunter.

What Christian writers in the Renaissance meant by “atheism” was not so much unbelief, but acting immorally, as if there was no God (and no afterlife to fear for one's transgressions). John Bunyan's *Atheist* sadly recounts how he searched for the supernatural world, and having to his great sadness not found it, he set off to find however much previously avoided sin he could commit. Ryrie's topic, then, is not about embracing or rejecting a doctrinal belief, but observing religious practices, adhering to “specifically religious ethics,” and participating

in an “avowedly religious community.” People who tried to do these things, but didn't or couldn't, were de facto unbelievers

For Ryrie, atheism in the Middle Ages was something like shameless open immorality, call it a contemptuous form of mortalism (blasphemy, hatred of the clergy, dismissal of miracles, etc. “Unbelief,” wrote Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682) “was the general scandal of my profession.” But evidence for this is scarce. Browne himself had his own idiosyncratic Baroque version of faith (and no scruples about burning witches at the stake). But elsewhere seeds of trouble were growing. Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* (1517) praised religion in the ancient Roman mode as a vital institution for preserving a civilized state. On the contrary, in *The Prince* (1516)—but not published till 1532, five years after his death—religion is treated as a sociopolitical tool: an essential element in running the state, not the guide to meaning of life. Unlike Roman paganism, Christianity weakened the state. Machiavelli wanted Christianity replaced by “something more muscular and (to be plain) more manly.” Nietzsche, who admired the greater “masculinity” of Islam would have agreed. Of course, technically speaking, this amounts to atheism. But ironically in the “social, political, and emotional history of unbelief” intellectual denial of God was peripheral rather than central because most modern forms of atheism place even more stress on the core Christian virtue of mercy, even if they don't use the word.

Machiavelli made a major contribution to modern atheism by his concentration on Lucretius' doctrine of chance and the denial of the immortality of the soul. In a piquant contrast Erasmus held that Christians were the ultimate Epicureans because they thought the goal of human life was happiness; and true (eternal) happiness can be found only in virtue, making them consistent eudaemonists.

On the other hand, if Christianity was all about ethics (as opposed to, say, sacramental experience), hadn't many pre-Christian pagans been highly virtuous and religious? (Erasmus liked to say, *Saint Socrates pray for us?*) And in that case, however exalted an example Jesus was, could he be strictly speaking "necessary"? (Or, impious as it sounds, were the Prophets any more than eloquent, imaginative expositors of the Law?) For that matter, wasn't a good life perfectly possible without God?

Erasmus loyally stayed in the Church while mocking its superstitious and idolatrous practices. But the radical innovations of at least some Reformers would go much farther; and that left large and perilous room for uncertainty. How could believers be sure they were being true to the Gospel, were living, as the Catholics put it, in the "state of grace," and on the path to salvation? Rational criticism of "heathenish" practices and beliefs (infant baptism, the cult of the saints, pilgrimages, ancient myths and legends) could and eventually did descend into iconoclastic frenzy and rejection of all, or almost all, traditional ceremonies, formulas, and

sacramentals—symbolized perhaps by huge piles of smashed stained glass?

And lastly mightn't all this lead to naked unbelief? (For many it obviously did.) As Montaigne (d. 1592) wrote,

Once you have put into their hands (the common people) the foolhardiness of despising and criticizing opinions . . . and once you have thrown into the balance of doubt and uncertainty any articles of their religion, they soon cast all the rest of their beliefs into similar uncertainty. (tr. M.A. Screech)

Montaigne lived during (and almost lost his life in) the religious wars between Catholics and the Huguenots in late Sixteenth-century France; and so one can appreciate why this supreme skeptic (his famous motto being "Que sais-je?") would dislike religious unrest. But Ryrie goes too far in labeling Montaigne a believer. He was an Epicurean, a Pyrrhonist, a dedicated classicist-humanist, with no faith whatsoever in the afterlife. He did die while attending mass in his sick bed at the moment of the elevation; but he behaved in these matters as Horace or any of his Roman worldly friends would attend the official religious festivals of the state: as a civic duty, not an expression of "devotion."

Protestants had a field day attacking the more arcane features of Catholic theology, such as transubstantiation, Mariolatry, clerical and papal supremacy, mandatory celibacy, Purgatory and limbo (unmentioned in the New Testament), etc. But where was this critical earthquake to stop? It was no

accident that the most learned and thorough German thinkers of the Reformation laid the groundwork for “Higher Criticism” and the faithless discipline of biblical studies.

Ryrie sees Montaigne as the father of fideism (later “weaponized” against Protestantism by Montaigne’s successors). But while his position can be written off as an irenic live-and-let-live compromise, it can also be seen as a profoundly irrational leap in the dark. It’s curious that Ryrie never mentions Montaigne’s longest and most spirited theological work, “The Apology for Raymond Sebond.” (II, 12) which is often celebrated as the *nec plus ultra* of “Christian skepticism.” (In some graphic sections of the essay Montaigne describes various forms animal intelligence as superior to the human, suggesting that that, *pace* the Scholastics, theology is at bottom no “science” at all. Imagine trying to explain “Christian skepticism” to St. Paul or Augustine.

These are tricky territories to survey. Isn’t there a destructive fury in Calvin’s assault on Catholicism that could be seen as spilling over onto any kind of orthodox Christian theology? And what to make of Browne’s simultaneous flirtation with both belief and unbelief in *Religio Medici*? Is Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus a tragic hero or a supreme fool for playing a reversed type of Pascal’s bet, and thereby suffering damnation? Or do Faustus’ slash-and-burn putdowns of orthodoxy not strongly suggest that the whole mythic fantasy of selling one’s soul for

pleasure (Faustus mostly engages in silly misbehavior) is a joke—once again we hear echoes of Lucretius’ brisk dismissal of post-mortem existence?

So, in a certain basic sense the roots of modern atheism lay in .... Protestantism. “Protestantism’s entire doctrine of authority was compressed between the Bible’s cover, and that was a difficult job of containment at the best of times ... If you could not uncomplicatedly trust that the Bible was God’s Word [and how exactly did you define *that*?], the reading it was utterly changed. Thoughts and doubts about the text’s meaning was a “wood-worm quietly eating away the cross-beams of your faith.” Hence the quintessential doubt and anxiety bedeviling modern faith.

Ryrie points to Hobbes and Spinoza as the archetypal founders of modern atheism, even though neither strictly qualified as such and (naturally) never embraced the term. The final section of *Leviathan* (1561) savagely strafed the Catholic Church and exploded biblical authority. But since secular governments enjoyed absolute authority, and absolute religious truth is unknowable, that same secular government could rightly have the final say on all matters of religion. Spinoza too demolished the supreme authority of Scripture and completely denied the possibility of miracles, thus leaving the world as remote from any kind of divine intervention on humans’ behalf as Epicurus and Lucretius did.

The history of religious conflicts, of faith and doubt, of theism and

atheism and all related subjects—which in one way or another constituted the theme of most of the books and pamphlets published in the western world till at least the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century—thus turns out, as Ryrie sees it, into a cosmic emotional psychomachia. And how not? Faith-based certainty might be compared to the gleaming surface of a frozen lake. One skates in speedy delight across the silvery surface—until one hears an ominous crack and one’s foot gets either lightly snagged or deeply stuck in the ice. (Call it the uh-oh, as opposed to the aha, experience: one existentially realizes the depth and danger of the enormous liquid mass beneath one. The brilliance of Ryrie’s book is the vast company of writers, from the famous and familiar (John Bunyan, Robert Burton, Christopher Marlow, Richard Hooker, Walter Raleigh, etc.) to the more or less obscure figures (to non-specialized readers anyhow) like Mary Springett, Caspar Schwenckfeld, Dirck Volckeset Coornhert, William Waldwyn, Eleazar

Duncan, and so on) that he assembles and conducts in a sort of rich but jagged harmony.

However elegantly told, the moral of the story is simplicity itself: leaving a safe, steady, religious position for what looks like an exciting and a dramatic one resembles St. Peter’s fabled attempted to follow Jesus’ bidding and walk on the Sea of Galilee is bound to be a highly “emotional” experience. i.e., more fearful than ecstatic, at least at first. And the possibility always remains, in one way or another, of going under, or, to change the metaphor, having to climb the fearsome mountains described by Gerard Manly Hopkins (“Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them, cheap/ May who ne’er hung there,” No worst, there is none.) Ryrie’s characterization of unbelief is a provocative and convincing one that readers situated at any point of the spectrum of faith or doubt or both will have something to learn from.

—Peter Heinegg