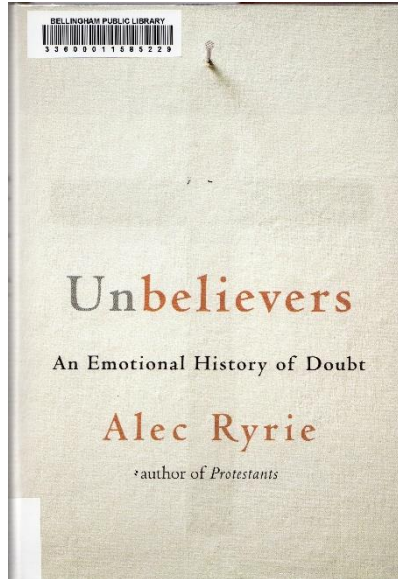


# Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt

by Alec Ryrie (Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2019)

Book summary by Erik Johnson (4/2020)



**Note from Erik:** This book is fabulous. My Master's Thesis was on the seventeenth century Puritans so I'm partial to the subject. I'm also a chronic doubter. I was amazed to learn that before atheism calculated intellectual reasons for non-belief, believers grappled with unbelief for emotional reasons, namely, anger and anxiety. Atheism existed in practice long before it existed in theory. I will do my best to distill Ryrie's research with accuracy, minimal editorializing, and maximum clarity. No summary can do justice to this elegant history. I highly recommend this book; it's only two-hundred-six pages.

## Contents

Introduction.....	2
1. An Age of Suspicion.....	3
Physicians, 'Naturians' and 'Nulla Fidians' .....	4
From Ancient to Modern .....	4
2. The Reformation and the Battle for Credulity .....	5
Calvin and the Epicures .....	6
Between Superstition and Impiety .....	6
'Doubt Wisely': From Innocence to Experience .....	8
Michel de Montaigne .....	8
William Chillingworth.....	8
Sir Thomas Browne .....	9
3. The Atheist's Comedy .....	9
Incest, Thunder and Wishful Thinking .....	9
Shaking off the yoke .....	10
The good atheist.....	11
4. The Puritan Atheist .....	12
"The Monster of the Creation" .....	12

Horrid Temptations.....	14
Fear of Flying.....	15
5. Seeking and Losing Faith.....	16
“‘It is a great matter to Believe there is a God’” .....	16
The Spiritualists’ Progress .....	17
Farther up and Farther in .....	17
Seeking a Rock to Build on .....	18
6. The Abolition of God.....	19
The Three imposters .....	19
Edward Herbert.....	19
Thomas Hobbes .....	19
Baruch Spinoza.....	19
From Then to Now, 1; Anger.....	19
From Then to Now, 2: Anxiety.....	20
From Jesus to Hitler.....	20

## Introduction

Author Alec Ryrie is a believer, a lay preacher in the Church of England, and YouTube teaching phenomenon. In this book he tackles several fascinating questions. How and why did unbelief blossom in the almost universally religious west? When intellectuals in the seventeenth century formulated reasons for disbelief why did so many believers find their arguments compelling? And, what did sociologist Peter Berger mean when he wrote, "Christianity has been its own gravedigger?"

Ryrie’s focus is mainly post-Reformation England (Puritans) with lots of medieval Roman Catholicism and a dash of Judaism mixed in.

Ryrie says most people make decisions for emotional reasons and only later look for arguments to support those conclusions. "People stopped believing and then found they needed arguments to justify their unbelief...It is not only religious belief, which is chosen for instinctive, inarticulate, intuitive reasons. So is unbelief...Anyone who needs a philosophy bad enough will find one," p. 4.

“I am not arguing that atheism is irrational. I am arguing that human beings are irrational; or rather, that we are not calculating machines, and that our ‘choices’ about what we believe are made intuitively, with our whole selves, not with impersonal logic,” p. 11.

“My hope is...that believers and atheists alike might understand better how unbelief has gone from feeling intuitively impossible to feeling, to many people, intuitively obvious; and how, during the long and fractious marriage between faith and doubt, both partners have shaped each other more than they might like to admit,” p. 12.

“To atheist readers, my message is: please appreciate that unbelief is, like most everything else human beings do, very often intuitive, non-rational and the product of historically specific circumstances....and to believers<sup>1</sup>, my message is please understand atheism and doubt are serious. They have real emotional power and moral force, and they have flourished and are flourishing for very good reasons. The fact that those reasons are often deeply rooted in religion itself makes them all the more powerful and means that the chasms separating us are narrower than we like to imagine,” p. 12.

## 1. An Age of Suspicion

Pre-reformation examples of unbelief which indicate atheism did not originate during the Enlightenment as is often assumed.

Psalm 14:1, “The fool has said in his heart there is no God.”

Fredrick II, Holy Roman Emperor, King of Sicily (1194 – 1250) was an unbeliever, p. 13.

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) wrote a defense of theism in the 1070s which suggests there were enough skeptics around to warrant such a book, p. 16.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) offered “proofs of God” imagining what an atheist’s arguments might be, p. 16.

In 1273 a merchant admitted to doubting the existence of the soul, no longer crossed himself, and denied the miracle of transubstantiation, things atheists do, p. 17.

In 1299 a moneylender dismissed the Bible as mere fiction, something an atheist would do, p. 17.

In 1526 blasphemers (the impious, rather than atheist manifesto writers) were hauled before the heresy-hunting courts of the Inquisition, p.18.

Unbelief eventually went from “insulting God” to “anger at God.” Or at least, anger at priests, popes, and clergy, etc. There was widespread resentment at being controlled by the church, being manipulated by fear of damnation, at tithes, fees, and offerings, at the churches’ merciless wielding of moral authority, p. 20, and at being forbidden to question transubstantiation (that bread and wine turn into Christ’s actual body and blood).

Catholic response to this last resentment was to insist that the harder it is to believe in this miracle the greater your faith. In other words, it is a badge of virtue to embrace by faith that

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<sup>1</sup> This is the sentence that endeared me to Ryrie, a Christian historian treating atheism with respect and intellectual sophistication. It’s been my experience that too often doubting believers are treated with shame, pity, scorn, and thundering condemnation.

which your mind questions. “Believing was meant to be hard,” p. 21. The more one doubted Catholic dogma, so the argument went, the greater one’s faith.

In 1448 Thomas Semer denied transubstantiation, the Bible, Jesus Christ, and the soul. He was burned at the stake for heresy, the “sin of unbelief.”

Mortalism, the belief that there is no afterlife, heaven, or hell, needed regular denunciation, p. 23. The Inquisitors called this Epicureanism (after Epicurus who denied the afterlife and affirmed naturalistic explanations for the universe). In pre-reformation days Epicurean unbelief and doubt were isolated, individual incidents, not representative of any movement or sect. Denial of the afterlife was not fired by anger, but anxiety. Uncertainties about the afterlife “were a perennial feature of medieval Christendom, but not a serious threat to it,” p. 25. Doubt kept faith “limber,” p. 26.

### **Physicians, 'Naturians' and 'Nulla Fidians'**

Christianity had an uneasy relationship with medieval medicine. Physicians were heirs to Europe’s most robustly secular intellectual traditions. Doctors looked for natural causes for disease and did not rely on priestly rituals for healing. “To summon medical help was to enter a notoriously skeptical world; a nest of paganism at the heart of Christendom,” p. 26. Doctors wanted to alter fate, not teach people to submit to it, p. 26. This created considerable tension with theologians.

Physicians who ascribed natural causes to disease were called, “Naturians.” Priests objected when patients looked for recovery in a doctor’s skill rather than God’s mercy, p. 27-28.

In 1560 William Bullein wrote a play of satirical fiction in which a physician claims to be a “Nulla fidian,” meaning, “a person of no faith,” p. 29. The newly coined word “atheist” had not yet reached wide circulation.

“With its suggestion that *Christian* and *physician* were incompatible alternatives, it implies that the medical world was one of those reservoirs in which unbelief lay dormant throughout the Middle Ages—until stirred into life by what the unbelieving physician named Basin called ‘philosophy,’” p. 31.

### **From Ancient to Modern**

When medieval scholars discovered the cultural and political riches of ancient Greece and Rome (Epicureans, Cicero, and Lucretius for example), scholars were eager to glean ideas for creating better republican city-states. Then theologians merged Greco-Roman philosophy with Christianity. And thus was born the Renaissance. With their veneration of the ancient world came suspicions that theological corruptions had snuck into Christendom over the centuries, p. 32. The Bible and its interpretation were studied in new, skeptical ways. “Renaissance humanism had a distinctly secular flavor,” p. 33.

It was no secret that many ancient philosophers were atheist. Christian orthodoxy was challenged when Cicero, Pliny, Epicurus, Lucretius, etc. were used as a yardstick to measure faith and ethics. Unbelief began to seep into Europe's groundwater, p. 33.

In the 1400s the unorthodox theologian Marsilio Ficino claimed people who suffer from melancholy had "cold, dry, and black" humours and were therefore drawn to doubt, mistrust, and unbelief, p.33-34. Doubt was seen as a matter of poor mental health.

Ancient writers who influenced unbelief in the Renaissance: Cicero (**Of the Nature of the Gods**), Pliny the Elder (**Natural History**) who said the world was run by nature, not providence, Lucretius, who said the world was run by chance, not providence, and Machiavelli (**The Prince** and **Discourses on Livy**).

Ryrie writes, "At the very least, the Renaissance ensured that anyone searching for unbelief knew where to look," p. 40.

Etienne Dolet (d. 1546) said there is no soul and Christ is merely mortal, p. 40.

Lelio Sozzini (1549) wrote, "most of my friends are so well educated they can scarcely believe God exists," p. 40.

Richard Harvey (1590) wrote, "Italy hath been noted to breed up infinite Atheists," p. 41.

Ryrie says, "The old unbelief of anger had acquired a new mood of cosmopolitan satirical scorn," p. 41. "The cynicism and mockery of Renaissance humanists did not mark the start of a high road to modern atheism, any more than the anger of medieval blasphemers or the professional disdain of learned physicians. Self-limiting and by definition marginal, these atheisms were irritants, in equilibrium with the faith rather than destabilising it. If the Renaissance contained a serious threat to Christendom it was of a subtler kind." p. 42.

This was the threat: if Christianity is about ethics, and if pagans could be ethically virtuous, can unbelievers become truly godly? If so, is Christ even necessary? Maybe reason and natural law implanted in every human soul would bring everyone to the same destination. If so, shouldn't Christians concentrate less on devotion and sacraments and more on cultivating virtue? p. 43.

This implications of this approach became more dangerous in centuries to come.

## **2. The Reformation and the Battle for Credulity**

Ryrie counters the well-established view that unbelief is a product of the Reformation. The story goes like this: Luther's departure from Rome shattered western Christendom creating rival camps that pounded each other with polemical and then actual artillery. Such division, so the argument goes, created the theory that all sides were wrong, and irreligion then became a convenient way to avoid religion and religious wars. Ryrie says there is truth in this narrative but it's incomplete. It doesn't explain why Christianity endured for centuries after the Reformation.

A more complete history of unbelief, says Ryrie, recognizes that unbelief played a larger role in the Reformation than heretofore understood.

### **Calvin and the Epicures**

When Geneva's John Calvin heard that unbelief was rampant in France he was unnerved because those unbelievers were often radical Protestants, p. 46. Converts out of Catholicism into Reformed denominations were falling through the cracks. When Jacques Gruet was found guilty of laughing at scripture, casting aspersions on Christ, and denying the immortality of the soul, he was decapitated in 1547 in Geneva. Calvin especially opposed Gruet's mockery of the Bible, the Reformation's primary document. Behind Gruet's unbelief was anger at Calvin himself; "rage seethed through his [Gruet's] texts" p. 47.

Calvin wrote (**Concerning Scandals**, 1550), "Whereas thirty years ago religion was flourishing everywhere, and we were all in agreement about the common and customary worship of God, without any controversy, now ungodliness and contempt for God are breaking out on all sides," p. 48.

Ryrie's interpretation of Calvin's quote (in my own words), when Protestants saw the light and mocked Roman Catholicism, they didn't know when to quit. Their caustic barbs went beyond the papacy and priests and eventually to the Bible and then to God himself, p. 48. Protestantism was actively leading Christians away from faith, p. 49.

### **Between Superstition and Impiety**

Reformers saw themselves as crusaders against Roman Catholic superstition. Doubting Christians in the Reformation age had only one other option, impiety. Catholics loathed superstition, p. 49, but preferred it to impiety. Protestants were so repelled by superstition they preferred impiety than, "devour the pestiferous dung of papistry," p. 49. They were willing to risk a measure of unbelief in order to be rid of superstition. "As one Catholic put it, not unfairly: 'a Catholic may commonly become sooner Superstitious, than a Protestant; And a Protestant sooner become an Atheist, than a Catholic,'" p. 49.

Protestant Francis Bacon (1612) wrote, "It were better to have no Opinion of God at all; than such an Opinion, as is unworthy of him," p. 50. In other words, ignorance is better than slander; many believed atheism was less likely to lead to public calamity than superstition, p. 50. Better to brave the dangerous wilderness of unbelief than to return to Rome's dungeon of superstition.

Protestant Henry More (1614-1687) explained that when God graciously permitted people release from Catholicism, the devil carried men out of one dark prison into another, out of Superstition to Atheism, p. 50.

Catholics wouldn't take this in stride. They fought back and defended transubstantiation, the authority of the pope, and the value of relics. (One Catholic missionary forged miracles on

the grounds that, “godly credulity doth much good, for the furthering of the Catholic cause,” p. 51). Protestants derided credulity and had no wish for foster incredulity. But how do you reject some beliefs while still embracing others?

One solution was to choose carefully which superstitions to deny. There was a problem, however. How does one exercise faith in doctrines that transcend reason, and at the same time reject superstitions on the grounds they are irrational? Pascal solved this riddle by stating reason is fallible. “Reason” in the seventeenth century meant “a power of perception, the power to perceive truths that lay outside of us.” It was similar to taking a leap of faith, p. 52. This definition is different than modern definitions of reason, namely, the modern method of applying logic to solve problems. Faith meant submitting reason to the authority of the Bible (Protestant) or Church and Pope (Catholic).

At the center of these debates was the doctrine of transubstantiation. Protestants were split on what to make of this sacrament. Was there an actual presence of Christ in the wine or is the rite merely symbolic?

Catholics ramped up their defense of transubstantiation with, “The more a doubter by reason, ransacketh and searcheth for reason, in those things that passeth reason...into the further doubt he falleth” p. 53. In my own words this means, quit trying to understand this miracle. Or to summarize Richard Smith’s defense of the Mass, transubstantiation is a mystery, we can’t fathom it, which is okay because the harder it is to believe the more robust one’s faith.

Another Catholic writer, Bishop Stephen Gardiner, praised the disciples who, when they heard about eating Christ’s body, did not protest but believed. The doubting Capernaimites (John 6:52), were scorned for their carnality, p. 54.

Ryrie said Protestant attacks on the Mass were largely derisive, mocking, scoffing. The French Catholic Michel de Montaigne believed Protestant’s reckless scorn started a fire that went out of control, p. 55. Some cases in point:

Protestant Noel Journet (1570s) was put to death for circulating tracts which ridiculed the Bible, p. 55. Protestant Geoffroy Vallee was executed for religious eccentricities, p. 56. Some Protestants who questioned purgatory eventually questioned hell, p. 56. Some Protestants who questioned transubstantiation eventually questioned the Bible, p. 56. Protestant polemicists blamed unbelief on Catholic doctrine, “silly ceremonies and ridiculous observances,” p. 56.

As the arguments flew back and forth both sides agreed their opponents were not idiots but had a, “carnal inability to see the ravishing spiritual vision before their eyes,” p. 58.

“The Reformation era’s battle for credulity was a high-wire act. To attack your opponent’s doctrines as nonsensical and an affront to reason, while defending your own as incomprehensible and transcending reason, was a heady, exhilarating and dangerous achievement. All sides in the Reformation debates were encouraging both credulity and

corrosive skepticism, teaching believers simultaneously to doubt and to loathe doubting. Skepticism was now not the opposite of faith, but a necessary component of it,” p. 60.

### **‘Doubt Wisely’: From Innocence to Experience**

Every first generation Protestant had been raised Catholic. The Reformation offered believers a religious choice. Conversions flowed in both directions, Protestant to Catholic, Catholic to Protestant. Passing from the security of one type of Christianity to another meant passing from innocence to experience. “Unreflective acceptance of universal truths was no longer possible. People who wanted to hold on to their faith could find serious, honest, intellectually rigorous and emotionally satisfying ways to do so,” p. 70. Here are three men who succeeded.

#### **Michel de Montaigne**

Wary of religious bloodshed, Catholic Montaigne believed most religion was born of habit, ignorance, and prejudice, p. 61. He made fun of fellow believers who treated victory in battle as vindication from God but refuse to see defeat as vindication for their enemies, p. 62. As a philosophical skeptic he believed no certain knowledge of any kind at all was possible, p. 63. His motto, “not to believe too rashly; not to disbelieve too easily,” p. 63. To settle the unsettling matter of feeble reason, Montaigne chose to submit to “the authority of our ecclesiastical polity,” p. 65, which is a type of fideism. Ryrie concludes “skepticism is not the bedrock of atheism. It is the solvent of all our pretensions to knowledge, and therefore the necessary beginning of any true faith<sup>2</sup>,” p. 65. Ryrie says this approach to faith, “did not answer doubts; it simply bypassed them<sup>3</sup>,” p. 65. Montaigne surrendered to uncertainty and accepted that once he doubted everything, including his own doubts, there was nothing left but to embrace faith, p. 71.

#### **William Chillingworth**

Born a Protestant, Chillingworth embraced skepticism at an early age. He then converted to Catholicism. Finding Catholicism an unsure footing for certainty he spent five years in indecision, “doubting between communions,” (Protestant or Catholic), p. 66. He then converted back to Protestantism. He wrote a spiritual memoir, **The Religion of Protestants a Safe way To Salvation**. While attacking Catholic fideism he claimed Protestant certainty by redefining religious certainty. In religious matters we cannot have mathematical certainty, but we can have moral certainty beyond a reasonable doubt, p. 68.

Give Chillingworth 51% confidence that one religion is better, and he’ll commit 100%. According to Chillingworth’s book, one can’t have much more than 51% certainty on religious matters. His book was so unpopular among Protestants that the officiant at Chillingworth’s

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<sup>2</sup> Believers who scorn doubt would do well to read this powerful comment of Ryrie’s several times.

<sup>3</sup> Unbelievers who scorn faith would do well to read this powerful comment of Ryrie’s several times.



funeral buried his book with him saying, “Get thee gone then, thou cursed book...that thou mayest rot with thy author, and see corruption,” p. 69. In summary, Chillingworth’s truce with uncertainty was to recognize that absolute truth was beyond his grasp; he resolved to make the best of the shaky and partial truths which shaky and partial minds could grasp, p. 71.

### **Sir Thomas Browne**

The third seventeenth century figure Ryrie introduces who model how to have faith in a world of religious uncertainty is Sir Thomas Browne’s **Religio Medici** (1642). This book is a “sly meditation on Christianity from a physician’s perspective,” p. 69. The unorthodox Browne had been an atheist, returned to Protestantism, and repudiated Montaigne’s fideism based on “the dictates of my own reason...beset by sturdy doubts, and boisterous objections.” Objections to faith made his faith sturdier. He remained in the faith not by reason but on his knees praying. “To believe a thing not only above, but contrary to reason, and against the arguments of our proper senses,” p. 70. This is Protestant fideism. In summary, Browne joyfully embraced uncertainty by believing all the more strongly because faith is out of the reach of human reason,” p. 71.

“Montaigne, Chillingworth, and Browne were not consumed by their anxieties, they had doubted wisely, picked their way up the cragged and steep path, and found their way, if not to the summit, at least to secure ground level...This climb requires nimble footwork.” Not every believer in post-Reformation Europe successfully held skepticism while the battle for credulity swirled around them, p. 71. One stumbling pilgrim was Catholic Jean Bodin who married a Protestant. He observed, “wishing to return to a religion you have abandoned was like a eunuch aspiring to be whole again,” p. 73.

## **3. The Atheist’s Comedy**

“By the early seventeenth century, it was generally agreed, Europe was drowning under a rising tide of atheism,” p. 75. Philippe du Plessis-Mornay wrote the first major book devoted to attacking atheism, **Of the Truth of the Christian Religion**, 1581. It went through thirty-seven editions in six languages. There apparently was a need for such a book. The seeds of atheism had been sown in the soil of medieval Europe which the Reformation cultivated, p. 76.

Historical side note: it’s hard for historians of this period to get firsthand accounts of atheism because atheists feared the rack, pike, and thumbscrew and kept their opinions to themselves. Historians are forced to build a caricature of a typical atheist based on anti-atheist sermons, tracts, and plays.

### **Incest, Thunder and Wishful Thinking**

When plague broke out in 1647 in Scotland Presbyterian ministers called for public repentance, confessing the sins that wrought this divine terror. The merchants confessed being

atheist, more concerned with profit than God, p. 77. Sailors followed, confessing “atheistic hardness of heart,” p. 77. In both cases the word “atheism” was hyperbolic code for worldliness and run-of-the-mill sinfulness. Preachers latched on to this and shocked their congregations with (my paraphrase), “See what happens when you forget God? You become a sinner.”

Into this maelstrom of theological controversy Catholic and Protestants suss out what faith actually is. A gift from God without effort of the will? Wavering opinion? Lazy assumption? Heartfelt conviction? True faith founded on rock? p. 78. “Set against this daunting standard, the only conclusion must be that a great many people do not truly believe what they believe they believe,” p. 78. “In other words, if you have too high or idealistic definition of belief, you turn everyone, including yourself, into an unbeliever,” p. 79.

Thanks to the preacher’s expansive definitions, everyone “knew” the “fact” that atheists were “moral monsters, creatures of utter depravity enslaved to lusts, who had either abandoned their faith in order to wallow in sin, or had become so sunk in sin that they had lost hold of their faith,” p. 79. Ryrie comments, “We should not necessarily believe this grotesquely self-serving caricature,” p. 79.

English playwright Cyril Tourneur (1611) wrote **The Atheists’ Tragedy**, (“not one of the jewels of the age of Shakespeare” p. 79). Tourneur makes the character playing the atheist complicit in all manner of blasphemies and debaucheries, including incest. Based on this, preachers claimed atheism lead to incest and incest lead to atheism, p. 80. Ryrie calls this a “scare tactic,” p. 81. The incestuous atheist became a stock figure in theater and sermon. Another trait of atheists is their disregard for the portentous message of thunder. Believers commonly thought thunder was emblematic of God’s anger. To scoff at thunder as “mere nature” was a serious breach indeed, p. 81 to 83.

Protestant Richard Hooker summarized what atheists actually believed. They denied the authority of scripture and the immortality of the soul, p. 83. Protestant invective against popery and transubstantiation was now turned against the Bible. They treated it as a joke. Hooker believed immortality and God’s future judgment were, “principal spurs and motives unto all virtue,” p. 84. He believed atheism was “wishful thinking,” p. 85, an excuse to throw off all constraint. Defenders of the faith said those who live licentiously “wish” there not to be a God, p. 85. Because disbelief in God was seen as a willful act men, “gouged out their own eyes expressly in order not to see God,” p. 85. In short, atheism was seen as an ethical rather than philosophical stance, p. 86. By aligning unbelief with intolerable antisocial depravity preachers and theologians did not feel the need to respond to atheist claims; just condemn them, p. 86.

### **Shaking off the yoke**

Sir Walter Raleigh and Christopher Marlowe were charged with atheism, which they both denied. Besides, proof was hard to come by. Their impiety bordered on a mischievous, loose-

tongued “taste for danger” banter, and debate, p. 89, and “mockery,” p. 94. “On the rare occasions when early modern courts dealt with allegations of atheism, they often turn out to have been more about defiance of moral authority than about doctrine,” p. 94.

The more Protestants and Catholics dug in their heels, the more controlling they became. “Naturally, some people bristled at this, and reviled the clergy as officious hypocrites,” p. 95. The clergy insisted they were merely messengers, implementing the will of God, p. 95.

Pascal thought most people give little thought to ultimate meaning and say they have “shaken off the yoke, that he does not believe that there is a God watching over his actions, that he considers himself sole master of his behavior, and that he proposes to account for it to no one but himself,” p. 95-96.

How did theologians account for atheism? One person blamed, “ridiculous dull Preachers,” p. 96. Churchmen responded, the flaws of a few messengers have no bearing on the truthfulness of the message, p. 96.

### **The good atheist**

The atheists described in this chapter were to sixteenth-century believers more annoyance than genuine existential threat, p. 97. Atheists had no moral authority and their alleged libertine lifestyle made condemnation easy. However, Ryrie points out, “there is not much direct evidence that real unbelievers frankly abandoned their ethics,” p. 97. If anything, atheists could be accused of cowardice. With good cause. Disclosing unbelief was to invite execution. It also meant ostracism from society.

Ryrie concludes this chapter with several examples of good atheists.

Gabriel Acosta was Jewish born and converted to Catholicism. At age twenty he converted back to Judaism. Such apostasy could cost him his life so he fled to Amsterdam and joined the Jewish community. Not being able to find any evidence for immortality in the Hebrew scripture, he got kicked out of the synagogue. He rejected the accusation that by renouncing his faith he renounced morality, p. 99. He based his ethics on laws of nature. Acosta’s notion of morals without religion was not unique.

Dutch moralist Dirck Volckerstz Coornhert wrote **Ethics** (1586) from reason and without any citations from scripture.

English physician Eleazar Duncan wrote a tract (1606) urging patients to consult learned doctors even though they have no religion. “Even an atheist physician could be trusted to care for his patients,” p. 100.

English playwright Cyril Tourneur (1611) cited earlier included in **The Atheists’ Tragedy** an atheist character Sebastian who acted justly, p. 100. “Neither pious Christian, virtuous pagan nor villainous atheist, Sebastian represents a dangerous possibility; that unbelief

might discover ethics of its own,” p. 101. Plays like this earned the well-known Puritan scorn and condemnation of the theater.

William Shakespeare’s religion remains hidden, though he was not an atheist. Yet he never uses the word atheist, infidel, or unbeliever probably avoiding the topic; his plays are also void of pious Christians.

“Acosta, Coornhert, Eleazar Duncan, Tourneur’s Sebastian and Shakespeare’s secularized ethical vision suggest that it was not only possible, but even natural for the unbelief of anger to be fired by its own moral code. The Church wanted angry unbelievers to stick to their role as villains. Instead, they were beginning to bid for the moral high ground,” p. 105.

## 4. The Puritan Atheist

### “The Monster of the Creation”

Angry unbelievers attracted attention but were not seen as a serious threat. “The outcome of a battle is rarely determined by deserters,” p. 106. “It is time to turn our attention to the other, better-concealed, but ultimately more consequential vein of early modern unbelief; the unbelief of anxiety,” p. 106-107.

English satirist John Earle (1628) describes a new kind of atheist, an “agonized vacillator,” p. 107. This atheist feels the pull of both arguments “with wise and honest men on both sides,” p. 107. He changes his mind every time he reads something anew. “He is so paralyzed by the possibility of being wrong that he will never settle on anything as right,” p. 107. “He finds doubts and scruples better than resolves them; and has always some argument to non-plus himself. The least reason is enough to perplex him, and all the best will not satisfy him” p. 107.<sup>4</sup>

John Donne counselled such Christians to first “stand inquiring” and then choose their path. The anxious skeptic is “rooted permanently to the spot,” p. 108.<sup>5</sup> The agonized indecisive, p. 108, thinks of nothing else and hopes God does exist. Their turmoil is emotional before intellectual.

Pastoral consolations to distraught doubters included the following.

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<sup>4</sup> This is the theme of Daniel Taylor’s, **The Myth of Certainty**.

<sup>5</sup> Indecision has a bad reputation in science, politics, economics, relationships, and theology. However, I think the reflective person torn between two viable options is neither wishy-washy nor willfully belligerent. It’s a mindset of thoughtful, careful, analysis of evidence; one who can’t help but see merit on both sides of many arguments. Uncertainty is not a pathology, it’s a trait of the cautious, curious, and contemplative. See my three-volume set of quotes, **Faces of Uncertainty** (2018).

William Perkins, the Puritan C. S. Lewis of his day<sup>6</sup>, warned that “these two thoughts, *There is a God*, and *there is no God*, may be, and both are in one and the same heart,” p. 109. He also warned, “A man cannot always discern what be the thoughts of his own heart,” p. 109.

Protestants loaded the word “faith” with more weight than ever before. Belief was no longer “holding an opinion,” p. 109, “promoting a creed,” or “a thing to recite,” but rather a heart to assent.

Catholics grappled, too. Friar Tommaso Campanella asked, “How can you be secure in your own faith when every sect trumpets its own certainties, and when most politicians’ religion is plainly a matter of convenience rather than of conviction,” p. 109.

Protestants grappled, too. For starters, Catholics could suppress troublesome books that fed doubt. Secondly, faith was a central part of Protestantism. Doubt was less acute for those in Lutheran or Calvinist churches with strict discipline, confession, and systematic theologies. Anxious Christians in these churches could outsource their concerns to the ministers who policed them. If you can’t be certain about your own beliefs you can be certain in your community’s shared faith, p. 110.

But in England, believers developed a strain of obsessively introspective piety distinguished by contortionist feats of self-examination, p. 110. At the center of English Protestants’ intense piety was the problem of unbelief.

Obadiah Sedgwick wrote **The Doubting Believer** (1641). He didn’t ask the question, “‘Is there a God?’ but rather, ‘Has God saved me?’” p. 111.

John Donne distinguished between the presumptuous atheist that believes no God, and the melancholic atheist that believes no Jesus applied to him, p. 111.

John Bunyan’s **The Holy War** distinguished “resurrection and glory doubters” (who deny immortality) from “election doubters,” (who wonder if they are elect), p. 111.

Richard Baxter, “seventeenth-century England’s wisest and most humane Protestant theologian,” p. 111, scolded Christians who doubted their salvation and by extension doubted scripture, a kind of “reproachful blasphemy,” p. 111.

This group of anxious doubters included a striking number of women.

Katherine Brettergh (1601) felt her unbelief meant “feebleness, and imperfection of her faith,” p. 108.

Elizabeth Juxon “groaned many a time under the sense of much unbelief” concerning whether or not she was predestined to heaven or hell, p. 110. Assurance of salvation in Calvinist churches was managed by conforming to church protocols. English dissenting Protestant churches had no such system and so believers had to police themselves. The anxiety of being “non-elect” proved overwhelming.

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<sup>6</sup> So said J. I. Packer in classroom discussion, Regent College, circa 1982.

The female penitent known only as I. G. “was tempted to think the word of God was her own word,” p. 112.

Hannah Allen’s (1650) was convinced she was damned, “I am the monster of creation,” p. 113.<sup>7</sup>

Sarah Wight (1640s) suffered four years of spiritual agony and attempted suicide multiple times.

A female doubter known only as M. K. slid from doubting salvation to doubting all the doctrines of the faith. John Donne’s distinction between presumptuous and melancholic atheism dissolved, p. 114.

Mrs. Drake (1640s) felt her damnation was certain so resolved to “spend her remaining time in jollity and merriment,” p. 114.

Dionys Fitzherbert endured spiritual torment. She knew how heartfelt her former faith had been. And since Calvinism teaches that true faith cannot be lost; if you fall away it proves that your faith was false all along. She was reduced to two options. 1) there is no such thing as I did believe, 2) the religion I professed was not true, p. 115.

Ryrie writes, “It was a vicious cycle. You fear you are damned, so your faith wavers; and because your faith wavers, you are even more convinced you are damned,” p. 113.

## **Horrid Temptations**

The troubled souls just mentioned were “canaries in the coal mine,” p. 115. Their anxious unbelief eventually impacted the most robust souls. In his autobiography John Bunyan, for example, describes how some unexpected thoughts grew into floods of blasphemies, p. 116.

Protestants who permanently lost faith did not tell their story in public. Puritans are famous for their detailed journals and spiritual memoirs (the confessional was replaced by outpourings onto paper). Here we find frequent references to the rising of atheistic thoughts.

Elizabeth Isham saw nature as the cause behind events.

Richard Baxter “questioned the Truth of scripture,” p. 116.

“Doubts...were not discussed openly, especially not in front of children,” p. 117.

People described their doubts as having been thrust unwillingly upon them by the devil. Calling doubts “temptations” meant these were not innocent ideas which needed to be considered seriously, nor were doubts sins for which one was culpable, p. 118. They were enemy attacks which required endurance and resistance. Furthermore, these doubts were individual matters, not a “movement” or “party.” People arrived at doubts on their own without outside assistance, p. 119.

The doubt in Reformation England was primarily about immortality and the reliability of the Bible. It was difficult to contain doubts about the Bible as scholarly Catholic attacks on

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<sup>7</sup> The modern medical condition of “scrupulosity,” a type of OCD, describes her morbid introspections.

scripture mounted. And if scholars disagreed, what hope did the layman have? “What made these thoughts so insidious was that they turned the problem into an impossible one. No faith could be ventured until all traces of uncertainty were banished,” p. 121. Trying to argue doubts away only made them worse,” p. 121.

Compounding the problem of doubt was the proliferation of sects, each with their own distinctive claims to truth, not to mention the proliferation of world religions which were discovered in those days of exploration, p. 123.

“Amid all these anxieties which drew early modern Protestants into unbelief, is it worth noticing one supposedly perennial problem which does not seem to have affected them. It had been a truism since ancient times, and still is today, that suffering and pain could break Christian’s faith, by making them question how a good God could permit such terrible things....All I [Ryrie] can say is that I have found precious little evidence of it. *Our accounts of temptation to unbelief do not ascribe those temptations to worldly suffering,*” p.123.<sup>8</sup>

Protestant and Catholic theologians believed in hell, a type of suffering nothing in this world could compare. Fear of hell was paralyzing, p. 124. Abandoning belief in hell was for some easier than being unhinged daily by fear of eternal torment. Welcome to the Radical Reformation.

Ludovic Muggleton (1640s) was convinced he was damned and withdrew from any kind of religious practice; he tried to live a virtuous life on his own terms. This wouldn’t save his soul but would spare him the misery of continuously contemplating future torment, p. 124.

## **Fear of Flying**

The atheists described in this chapter were not freethinkers; they were reluctant, even horrified atheists. “The temptation to atheism for earnest seventeenth-century Protestants was like fear of flying in our own age. With our rational minds we know that a plane will not simply fall out of the sky, but that knowledge is not much help as we sit white-knuckled through a nasty bout of turbulence,” p. 127.

Believers fought their doubts...

1) with reasoned arguments, “my nagging doubts make no sense.” This approach filled books and books but, according to Ryrie, were not very convincing. “The abstract thought that there were rational arguments for faith was comforting; the arguments themselves, less so,” p. 128.

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<sup>8</sup> Emphasis mine. This comment astounds me. In 1985 I wrote a Masters’ Thesis, **Puritan Attitudes Toward Providence and Pain: Suffering in England, 1647 – 1685** and missed Ryrie’s observation entirely. While cataloging Puritan documents that affirm faith in providence in the midst of suffering, I never thought to look for those who lost faith due to suffering. According to Ryrie, had I looked it is unlikely I’d have found many examples. This fact increases my already high esteem for Ryrie as an historian, and increases my esteem for Puritan faith which was, unknown to me until reading Ryrie, impervious to the problem of evil.

2) by ignoring them. Debating the arguments was too hard for some so they slighted them, did not attend to them, p. 129.

3) by persisting in the faith. Study and endeavor to please God, fulfill his will and our minds will be less troubled by these questions.

4) by waiting for God to give the gift of faith. Doubting Thomas did not believe yet continued to keep company with believers, p. 130.

5) with prayer, communion, and Bible reading. Treat broken faith like a broken limb; set it in a rigid cast of conventional pious practices, p. 130.

6) by pondering the evidences for God—first, in the created order of nature. “What man is there that beholding the frame of this world, may not perceive that there is a God?” p. 132. Second, in the human mind itself. “It is engraven in all hearts, that there is a Deity,” p. 134. People knew there was a God because they just knew. It was too self-evident to be logically proven, p. 135. Believers like John Donne surmised that atheists were subhuman, “no man,” and that unbelief was justifiably illegal, p. 136.

These approaches to belief were not helpful to everyone. “The Reformation had not made Christians ask these questions for the first time. Instead, it had taken doubts that had been suffused through the Church and distilled them. It mobilized doubt as a weapon and encouraged ordinary believers to do the same, in the hope that they would make their way through to a reflecting and experienced faith rather than a simple and trusting one... The aim was not to turn believers into unbelievers. It was to turn naïve believers into sophisticated, self-aware believers, who had confronted temptation and overcome it,” p. 137.

## 5. Seeking and Losing Faith

### **“It is a great matter to Believe there is a God”**

Doubt fueled by anxiety snuck into Christians, and Christian circles, and was thwarted with varying degrees of success. Doubting believers were unwilling conscripts into atheism’s army, p. 138. And those who cared about regaining faith wanted to do so quickly because doubt was assumed by many Christians to be a bad thing.

Thirteenth-century canon law called doubters “infidels,” p. 139.

Calling someone a Doubting Thomas was never a compliment.

“Doubt is the most terrible and pervasive of all sins,” said one commentator in 1619.

Early modern books of prayer regularly included prayers against doubt.

There of course was a difference between a denier and a doubter, the former deserving condemnation and the latter sympathy. Doubt was framed by many as trial by combat, p. 139.

“Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief,” implied faith and doubt were not opposites but companions. Puritan giant William Perkins wrote, “True faith, being imperfect, is always



accompanied with doubting, more or less,” p. 139. A much-repeated truism of the day, “Undoubtedly he that never doubted, never believed,” p. 14.

“Protestants, whose religion was grounded in skepticism, were trained not to ignore or suppress their doubts, but to lean into them in the hope and expectation that this was the road to a firmer, more mature, post-atheistic religion,” p. 141.

### **The Spiritualists’ Progress**

Once Protestants protested the Catholic church, the protests were hard to reign in. Martin Luther fought the pope on one side and fanatics on the other. Fanatics “perverted” the Reformation. These included Anabaptists who rejected infant baptism, and “spiritualists” p. 142 who believed the Reformation did not go far enough. Leaders like Sebastian Franck were so radical they cast off all sacraments, rituals, rites, baptisms, sermons, preachers, ceremonies, and even church gatherings, p. 143. This spiritualism was not atheism, but it could hardly have been more hostile to religion, p. 144.

Another spiritualist leader, Caspar Schwenckfeld took things even further. He claimed the Christian church had been absent for 1400 years and called for a “standstill,” abandoning all eucharists until a genuine Christian could be found. Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert added his voice to the radical reformation. At the center of this maelstrom was the Dutch Reformed doctrine of predestination. The anti-predestinarians met for discussion groups, called “colleges” and participants were called, “collegians,” p. 145. Adam Borrel joined the Collegians and in 1645 wrote **To the Law and To the Testimony** which taught that only the original disciples preached certain truth. No preacher or Bible reader since the first century could reach certainty and truth.

### **Farther up and Farther in**

Protestant radicalism came slowly to England. Radicals like Henry Barrow was executed for his heresies, William Hacket was executed for blasphemy, and Edward Wightman was burned at the stake in 1612, p. 148. Common among this group were denials of miracles, p. 149, denials of prayer, p. 150, and that God was wholly absent from the world, p. 150. Little wonder, therefore, that this “religious” movement earned the label “atheist.” As some Christians doggedly resisted the temptation to question the Bible, these radicals embraced questions and doubts as a way to get closer to God’s truth, p. 152. By rejecting cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith— heaven, hell, preaching, Bible, prayer—they were showing the depth of their faith, p. 153.

The political turmoil surrounding the collapse of King Charles I’s reign, and the tumultuous decades between 1640 and 1660, left the English government powerless to enforce religious conformity. Consequently, religious groups flowered without precedent, p. 153. The combatants in the religious wars that ensued shared a common trait: they hurled the accusation at each other, “atheist!” “After all, if someone opposes what you think is obviously right, despite having their error explained to them, naturally you will conclude they are defying God’s will,” p.

153. “Tolerationists certainly saw free religion as a lesser evil than forced superstition,” p. 156. “Once you have begun cracking open the husks of traditional Christian doctrines [IE., denying the truth of scripture] in order to reveal their spiritual kernels, how do you know when to stop?” p. 159.

### **Seeking a Rock to Build on**

Calming voices were heard amidst this sectarian chaos. Samuel Bolton (1646) and one of the Westminster Divines, wrote a book on how to survive in an age of abounding errors, p. 160. He framed these debates at a “test” to discover whether or not one’s faith was sound, “built on the rock” of Jesus Christ. “Let the storm do its work of washing away ill-founded habits and notions,” p. 161.

“Seekers” (a term coined in the seventeenth century) was a “mood,” striving to discern God’s will, 162. They came in two varieties: those who sought what to believe, and those who sought how to live, p. 164. One seeker’s fear of “being deceived by error meant that, as a pious duty, [Clement Writer] refused to embrace any firm truth,” p. 165. Seekers like Writer “believed that that time would come when God would send a new dispensation. The apocalyptic chaos around them implied that it might come soon,” p. 166.

Until that day came Seekers were still left with the question, “What do we do in the meantime?” One radical preacher answered this way, “If you live honestly and modestly, you shall do well enough. Gather together periodically to discuss what is good for the Commonwealth and read some good moral things like Plutarch or Cicero,” p. 168. “The Renaissance had sown the notion that God’s law in our hearts could transcend Christianity; now it was flowering,” p. 168. “If all doctrine and authority was uncertain, the only certainty left was God’s law written onto every human heart,” p. 169. “The only way to truly follow God was to abandon dogmatism,” p. 169. The problem with this approach, not everyone agreed on its content. What about War? Violence? Divorce? Polygamy? Promiscuity? Dancing? Gambling? Drinking? Smoking? p. 169.

The “Atheist” in Bunyan’s **Pilgrim’s Progress** tells Christian and Hopeful bitterly that he has “been seeking...twenty years” to no avail. He left home and all he had in pursuit of a fruitless quest. But now “I am going back again and will seek to refresh myself with the things that I then cast away,” p. 172. The “seeker’s life” was a painful life, p. 172. It is difficult to distinguish a libertine from a seeker, and a seeker from a libertine, p. 172.

## 6. The Abolition of God

### The Three imposters

Three seventeenth-century men, equivalent to today's "new atheists," symbolize the wide shift in mood.

#### Edward Herbert

In 1624 Herbert wrote two shockingly skeptical books, **On Truth** and **Pagan Religion** which wasn't published until after his death. Two things pushed him to embrace doubt, the doctrine of infinite punishment in hell, and predestination, p. 174. He "doubted piously," meaning he conformed outwardly to the Church of England as his patriotic duty but doubted its doctrine inwardly. This was not unlike Montagne's fideism, p. 175.

#### Thomas Hobbes

Hobbes' 1651 work, **Leviathan**, howled in rage against the Catholic clergy, p. 176. He was also infamous for doubting Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. His most notorious claim to fame, however, was his allegation that it's impossible to be certain of religious knowledge, p. 177. He was especially averse to the notion that government had authority over both a citizen's body and conscience.

#### Baruch Spinoza

This Dutch Jewish philosopher was booted out of the synagogue for his unorthodox views in 1656. Spinoza then joined the Collegians, seekers who believed more in the "inner light" than scripture, p. 179. "Seekerism and Spinozism met and meshed, and the Anglo-Dutch ferment of Protestant doubt and questioning that had been coming to a simmer for decades reached boiling point," p. 181. The result was mystical rationalism.

### From Then to Now, 1; Anger

By 1660 unbelief finally comes into the open and claims respectability for itself. Anger at being ordered around by priests was "eye-catching" but only became a serious threat when it asserted an ethical framework of its own, p. 182.

The Reformation's key religious weapon against Catholic superstition was skepticism. This required believers to transition to a different kind of post-skeptical faith. Protestants expected their faith to be settled but their intense self-reflectiveness made this difficult to achieve. The surge of anxiety, in which earnestly pious men and women found themselves beset by fears and uncertainties, could not be reasoned away because their doubts were not based on reason but emotion. Some unwilling skeptics turned their doubts into a tool "to rebuild their faith on a sound footing," p. 182. "And so the two streams came together. The moral force of the

unbelief of anger and the moral urgency of the unbelief of anxiety mixed into a gathering flow of insistent, ethically driven doubts that began carving Christendom's old-established landscape into something new," p. 182.

Blaise Pascal never competed his treatise against atheism; all we have are the hundreds of scattered fragments he left now compiled into **Pensées**. The gist of those quotes is "the futility of argument," p. 183. "Whichever side of the divide you have landed on, you will construct arguments to defend your position, but you should not mistake those post hoc rationalizations for your true reasons," p. 184.

From then until now there has been an angry theme in atheism: from Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, to Thomas Paine's **Age of Reason**, Dostoevsky's Fyodor Karamazov, to Monty Python's **Life of Brian**. Mockery, ridicule, and satire mingle with anger.

## **From Then to Now, 2: Anxiety**

"Alongside, and intertwined with, the unbelief of anger remains the unbelief of anxiety. The seventeenth-century agonized Puritans, wrestling with doubt, have had countless successors: individuals who have not embraced the fierce certainties of dogmatic faith or of angry unbelief, who are not so much as sitting on the fence as impaled on it. Sometimes these agonies have been resolved into more or less settled belief, or unbelief; sometimes doubts have withdrawn, *exhausted from the fray and make some sort of peace with their uncertainties...*" p. 192<sup>9</sup>.

"Dominic Erdozain's compelling history of anti-Christian thought argues that a whole series of these philosophers were in fact trying to purify Christianity, not destroy it," p. 193<sup>10</sup>.

## **From Jesus to Hitler**

A new kind of secularism has emerged in the Western world. According to Callum Brown's **Becoming Atheist** (2017), interviews with eighty-five adult atheists across Europe and north America, an epochal shift has taken place. The atheists interviewed share a remarkably consistent ethical code, p. 200. This involves the golden rule. "How did they reach such a consistently shared position?" p. 201. Brown suggests that it may arise from "within human experience. Reason alone may construct humanism...which affirms universal human rights," p. 201-202. Ryrie disagrees.

"As well as being the most catastrophic war in human history, the Second World War and in particular Nazi genocide was the defining moral event of our age, which set our culture's notions of good and evil," p. 202. Besides the German church being to some degree complicit with Nazism and fascism, this crisis revealed that Christianity's moral priorities were wrong. Cruelty, discrimination, and murder were evils in ways that fornication, blasphemy, and impiety

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis mine. This guy gets me.

<sup>10</sup> **The Soul of Doubt**. Fantastic book.

were not. Jesus was once the most potent moral figure in Western culture. After World War Two the most potent moral figure is Adolph Hitler. “It is as monstrous to praise him as it would once have been to disparage Jesus.” Hitler “has become the fixed reference point by which we define evil,” p. 203. “Nazism, almost alone in our relativistic culture, is an absolute standard: a point where argument ends, because whether it is good or evil is not up for debate,” p. 203. Christian imagery (crosses and crucifixes) have lost their potency; there is no visual image which now packs as visceral an emotional punch as a swastika, p. 203.

Ryrie cites how evil Nazism has permeated popular culture. Tolkien’s Sauron (**Lord of the Rings**), George Lucas’ Darth Vader (**Star Wars**), and J. K. Rowling’s Voldemort (**Harry Potter**), are ersatz Hitlers.

“And this is where the motional history of unbelief currently stands in what used to be Christendom. Perhaps we still believe that God is good, but we believe with more fervor and conviction that Nazism is evil,” p. 204.

“Two things at least are clear. First, Western Christendom is not about to snap back into place. The contemporary humanist surge is not a blip or an anomaly, but a continuation of moral forces that have been at work within the Christian world for centuries. Believers hoping it will go away ... are deluding themselves. Indeed, they are in some danger of being tempted by authoritarian nationalist voices that want to unlearn the Second World War's moral lessons. When such voices say ‘Christian’ they mean a tribal identity rather than a universal ethic. That is not merely repugnant. It is self-defeating. Western culture sloughed off this kind of seductive, compromised religion for a reason, and would if necessary, probably do so again. In the meantime, religions that dig their heels in to oppose the new moral environment risk taking on the role of medieval blasphemers: to validate a majority culture by offering it exactly the kind of predictable opposition it craves. The religions that will prosper in this environment will be those that work with the grain of humanist ethics, while finding ways to offer something that humanism cannot,” p. 206.