

Atheism as a Devotional Category

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Opposites are things alike in all significant respects but one.

—Marshall Sahlins

“ATHEISM” RETAINS AN UNCOMFORTABLE, PAROCHIAL QUALITY that suggests less a condition of conscience than a sort of special-interest group. Even after loving swipes in media coverage, the strident neoatheism of Richard Dawkins, Michel Onfray, and Christopher Hitchens has done little to dispel such an impression. Whether confined to the *Atheists United Newsletter*, used as a tag in the international directory of *Who’s Who in Hell*, or diagnosed in Freudian analyses whose general tenor can be summed up in one title, *Faith of the Fatherless*, “atheist” never quite seems to have become a common term for describing what would today seem a common enough condition.¹

Not in proper company, anyway: “secularist” and then “agnostic” arose as more acceptable options in the nineteenth century, and, today, 30 percent of those who deny God’s existence still refuse to identify themselves as atheists. According to a recent Pew survey, barely 3 percent of the American population confesses to being either atheists or more acceptable agnostics.² The term’s failure to establish itself reflects its historical status as a parochial category within religious discourse: sixteenth-century “atheism” was distinctly *not* a forerunner of liberal freethinking, nei-

¹ Warren Allen Smith, *Who’s Who in Hell: A Handbook and International Directory for Humanists, Freethinkers, Naturalists, Rationalists, and Non-theists* (New York: Barricade Books, 2000); Paul C. Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Dallas: Spence, 1999).

² Luis Lugo et al., *The American Religious Landscape and Politics, 2004* (Washington, DC: The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2005), 8.



ther practically nor even theoretically. Instead, it served the cause of confessional partisanship as a means by which to characterize and reshape not unbelief, but belief.

Occurrences of the term chart what in fact proved the exploration of a radically different practice of belief, one in which faith became reconfigured as a choice against atheism. Together, various early modern uses of “atheism” point to a conception of belief considered in the possibility and proximity of its opposite. Or, rather, they point to an opposing of belief and doubt in the first place, such that belief increasingly becomes inconceivable in the company of doubt—but, also, inconceivable without explicit condemnation and rejection of doubt. Instead of merely abstract absolutes, these developments opened onto seeing one’s own mind as a sort of experimental space, an inscrutable cognitive frontier in which the status of belief presented itself as a constant problem, and the experience of faith seemed to require a constant effort of will.

One wants to affirm that the atheist, even as merely an idea, constitutes a rupture—not simply the latest entry in a long sequence of heresies, imputed or real, against which Christianity had constitutively defined itself through the ages. If not *sui generis*, then at least it should mark a distinction on a different categorical level. Atheism seems to us intuitively to differ from other religious unorthodoxies, which constituted subordinate arguments about what *kind* of God, not *whether* God existed at all. But, in fact, the reverse was true: “atheism” followed a general shift away from the old Mediterranean enemies of Gnostics, Manicheans, and Cathars northward toward more chilly septentrional villains such as Anabaptists, Libertines, and Deists.

Occurrences of “atheist” spread quickly during the Reformation conflicts, riding on top of struggles that reshaped what it meant to believe. As one moves across a supposedly entrenched Catholic-Protestant divide, the devotional landscape painted in apologetical literature changes surprisingly little.³ The similar flora and similar fauna respond less to an underlying soil of doctrinal difference than they reflect the common climate under which lay devotion gradually assumed an overt, self-consciously confessional form. The division of Christianity into discrete confessions, abutting or overlapping one another, meant that post-Reformation creeds could no longer merely depend on social conformity to guarantee religious discipline. In communities riven between competing creeds, making a commitment to one’s faith came to entail something more deliberate than tacit consent, something more purposeful than weaving a web of local loyalties. Confessional formalization transformed the nature of religious affiliation from unspecified and potentially unreflective to explicit and volitional.

Within such a climate, the hypothetical absence of faith allowed believers to construe their own devotion as an intentional act, such that their faith might appear a willful “choice.” Atheism allowed followers to view themselves as electing their faith, however coercive their adhesion in fact proved—in fact, countervailing evidence suggested increased pressures toward religious conformity: new social structures arose, prayer books multiplied, churches were remodeled, and everywhere missals, catechisms, and printed professions of faith sought to mold the content of belief.⁴ This antagonistic climate of confessional competition depended upon the theoretical option of atheism in order to make such coercion feel consensual.

³ Gilles Banderier, “Poésie et apologétique à la fin du XVI^e siècle: Du Bartas et Duplessis-Mornay,” *Servir dieu, le roi et l’état: Philippe Duplessis-Mornay (1549–1623)*, ed. Hugues Daussy and Véronique Ferrer, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2006), 298–300; Julien-Eymard de Angers, *L’Apologétique en France de 1580 à 1670: Pascal et ses précurseurs* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1954), 77.

⁴ Gregory Hanlon’s research shows, hardly surprisingly, that supposedly “voluntary” devotional associations could exercise pervasive coercion among reformed populations in France’s Midi. *Confession and Community in Seventeenth-Century France: Catholic and Protestant Coexistence in Aquitaine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania

ATHEISM AND VOLITIONAL BELIEF

If Christians already enjoyed the infidel, the witch, the heretic, and the Jew as adversaries against whom to construe themselves as Christian, why did they need to add the atheist to their list? The shift toward an overtly voluntaristic faith culminated in an affirmation of religious identity that depended on skeptical self-inquiry into the caliber of one's own mental states. In his popular *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, Erasmus urged, "Accustom yourself to this mode of shrewd self-examination."⁵ This suspicion regarding one's own pious sentiments pushed ever wider segments of the population toward elaborating complex practices of self-awareness that presupposed a propensity not to believe. Religious writers might thus invite their readers to have the courage to disbelieve in order that they make a stronger commitment to their beliefs, rather than merely hold a faith "that believes what it fears only through not having the courage to disbelieve it!"⁶

In order to formalize themselves, reformed confessions needed to be able to treat belief as a stable *thing*, an axiom, not a hope or an ideal toward which one might strive. As belief became more reified, its opposite, faithlessness, assumed no less concrete and determinate a form. In effect, writers increasingly awarded to doubt the status of an objective category, imparting an ever more radical cast to lapses of faith. To the extent that a Christendom fractured by Reformation conflicts came to look for faith not within specific (and often beset) institutions, but in the affirmation of "belief" itself, it isolated and hypostatized doubt. If overwrought language in controversies suggested believing meant being free from all doubt, then doubting would seem to exclude any belief. No longer sensibly integrated within a capacious Christianity, relatively mundane qualms and innocuous speculation risked being refashioned in such a climate into radical and absolute "unbelief."

So, as belief assumed a more unconditional, sharply defined cognitive emphasis, unbelief consequently adopted less provincial and quotidian manifestations. Self-conscious confessionalized Christians began to construe their identities in relation to a more radical adversary—not any specific group of heretics, but an all-purpose full-blown "atheist" against whom they now affirmed themselves as believers. Within fifty years after the introduction of the term, a number of Christian apologists were claiming, in the name of defending their faith, that *everyone* was, at heart, an atheist. This construction of the "atheist within" played a key role in developing Western views of belief, religion, and secularism.

Press, 1993), 123. Patrick Collinson speaks of how "voluntary religion . . . was not at all eclectic but assumed predictable and consistent forms, forms which were expressive not so much of 'individualism,' still less of 'anarchy,' as of a stereotyped, programmed corporateness." *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 251.

⁵ *Enchiridion militis christiani* [The Handbook of the Christian Soldier], trans. Charles Fantazzi, in *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 66, *Spiritualia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 53.

⁶ Honoré Marseille de Vias, *Dieu cognu par la craincte et l'admiration d'une muse: Discours admirable contre la superstition payenne et l'Atheisme* (Paris: Ch. Sevestre, 1615), 46: "plaisante foy qui ne croit que ce qu'elle craint, pour n'avoir le courage de le descroire!" He is quoting Montaigne, *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne* (1595), ed. Pierre Villey (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965), 445: "Plaisante foy qui ne croit ce qu'elle croit que pour n'avoir le courage de le descroire!," trans. Donald Frame, *The Complete Works of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 325.

IMAGINED FAITHLESSNESS

If Bruno Latour is right to claim that modern atheists need to believe in “believers,” it is no less true that confessionalized Christians needed to believe in “atheists.”⁷ One apologist argued that the doctrine of predestination proved so harsh that it would be little wonder “if the disciples of such teachers became atheists.”⁸ But his prediction fell shy of the mark; atheism grew more present in the minds of everyone who engaged in the confessional struggles and came through with their faith reaffirmed. Lyndal Roper has intriguingly suggested that the “social discipline” propagated through such confessional identities created, by the same token, an obsession with excess.⁹ Similarly, the increased investment in confessional identity corresponded to a heightened sense of the proximity, accessibility, and potency of faithlessness—not merely in others, but in oneself.

True, the virulent denunciation of atheism at times seemed aimed merely at distracting one’s adversaries. Emond Auger, for example, cried loudest against atheism once he found himself ostracized from his order and teetering in a high-wire act at court. This renegade Jesuit wrote to defend the extravagant penitential practices he had instigated among the king’s entourage, arguing that the clergy should fear neither his followers nor the “over-zealous worship by lay Penitents in holy matters, and the practice of true Catholic piety, but rather the Atheists, and other heretical libertines.”¹⁰ Another writer’s similar denunciations followed fast upon the heels of his arrest for bigamy.¹¹ Such uses led Lucien Febvre to claim that the term amounted to little more than a casual slur on the part of those who lacked the mental tools for conceiving what true “atheism” might entail.¹²

Obviously, the term lacked the Nietzschean overtones and scientific trappings with which today’s usage freights it, and its sectarian nature figures in how writers projected atheism onto entire groups whose partisanship mirrored their own rigidifying confessional affiliation. A “band,” a “school,” a “confraternity,” a “troop,” an entire “race,” “Pharisees, Scribes, and other such races of vipers,” or a “Cabal,” which in later years would be suspected holding secret meetings at night.¹³ Bodin spoke in a fashion typical of his contemporaries (Hervet, Badius, Dupréau,

⁷ *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁸ Christophe Penfeunteniou de Cheffontaines, *Response familiere à une epistre écrite contre le Liberal Arbitre* (Paris: E. Petit, 1568), ã8^r: “si les disciples de tells docteurs deviennent à estre Atheistes.”

⁹ *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 145–67.

¹⁰ *Metanœologie: Sur le suget de l’Archicongregation des Penitens de l’Annociation de nostre Dame, et de toutes telles autres devotieuses assemblées, en l’Eglise sainte* (Paris: J. Mettayer, 1584), 137: “la trop gloute devotion des seculiers Penitens envers les choses saintes, et les exercices de la vraie pieté catholique, mais bien des Athées, et autres libertins heretiques, offensés, disoient ils, de la dissolution, et mauvaise œconomie du Clergé.”

¹¹ Jean Chassanion, *Réfutation des erreurs estranges et blasphemés horribles contre Dieu et l’Escripture Sainte* (Strasbourg: N. Wyriot, 1583), and *Des Grands et Redoutables Jugemens et punitions de Dieu* (Morgues: J. le Preux, 1581), pt. 2, chap. 14.

¹² *Le Problème de l’incroyance au XVI^e siècle* (1942; Paris: A. Michel, 1968), trans. Beatrice Gottlieb, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹³ Antoine Tolosain, *L’Adresse du Salut éternel et antidote de la corruption qui regne en ce siecle et fait perdre continuellement tant de pauvres âmes* (Lyon, 1612), 680: “bande des Athées”; Pierre Viret, *Instruction chrestienne en la doctrine de la loy et de l’Evangile* (Geneva: J. Rivery, 1564), ã5^r–6^r: “ceste bande”; Pierre de La Primaudaye, *Suite de l’Academie françoise* (Geneva: J. Chouët, 1593), “Avant-propos,” 2^r: “eschole,” trans. *The Second Part of the French Academie* (London: T. Adams, 1618), 332; Henri Estienne, *Deux dialogues du nouveau langage françois italianisé et autrement desguizé*, ed. P. (Pauline) M. Smith (Geneva: Slatkine, 1980), 346: “confrairie de ceux qui s’appelle ‘athées’”; Laval, “Des Philtres,” signed 3 July 1584, *Dessins des professions nobles et publiques* (Paris: A. L’Angelier, 1605), 355^r: “caterve d’ignorants Athees et imposteurs”; Joachim du Bellay, *Les Furies contre les infracteurs eu foy, in Œuvres poétiques*, ed. Henri Chamard (Paris: STFM, 1991), 7:153: “race d’Atheistes”; Auger, *Metanœologie*, 26:

d'Aubigné, and Tahureau, to name only a few) when he posited the existence of a “sect of Atheists.”¹⁴ Making atheism a *sect* betrayed a difficulty to comprehend unbelief as anything other than one more confession to emerge from the struggles of the Reformation.

Yet, the surreptitious but pervasive structural role that unbelief assumed in confessional formation explains an otherwise puzzling resurgence within Reformation controversy of apologetical literature. One might have expected the opposed Christian factions to have confined their arguments to Scripture and vied with one another principally over interpretations of the Bible. Apologetics, dependent as they were on extrascriptural arguments, should have receded to a dark corner of the conflicts, if not disappeared entirely. Yet, the invention of the “atheist within” brought apologetics back to the table of popular religious literature and, often, to the head of that table.¹⁵ A full study of this literature, vast as it is, remains to be written. Rather than attempt an anxious taxonomy here, we might instead examine how the static nature, if imprecise application, of atheism reflected less any particular movement than it worked broadly to transform the ways in which the general population related to faith.

To emerge from the Reformation conflicts, confessionalized Christians indulged “sacrilegious fantasies” about nonbelievers, into which they poured a tremendous amount of ingenuity.¹⁶ This new attention to atheism risked dragging apologetics—the most high-minded of popular religious genres—down to the street-level invective indulged in by scurrilous pamphlets and snarling broadsides. “Dregs of Satan’s vomit,” atheists were considered to have forfeited

“Phariseans, Scribes, et telles races de viperes”; Marin Mersenne, *L’Impiété des Deistes, et des plus subtils Libertins découverte, et refutée par raisons de Theologie, et de Philosophie* (Paris: P. Billaine, 1624), a3^r: “une Cabale de jeunes gens addonnez à leurs sens.”

¹⁴ Jean Bodin, *Les Six Livres de la République*, ed. Christiane Frémont, Marie-Dominique Couzinnet, and Henri Rochais (Paris: Fayard, 1986), 6:23: “secte detestable d’Atheistes”; Gentien Hervet, *Alexandri Aphrodisæi, de Fato* (Lyon: Æ. & J. Huguetan, 1544), A5^v: “ton atheos dicitur, secta”; Conrad Badius, preface to Jean Calvin, *Commentaires de M. Jean Calvin sur Timothee et Tite* (Geneva: C. Badius, 1561): “ces sectes . . . a scavoir de Libertins, Epicuriens, Atheistes, Servetistes, Castalionistes et autres”; Gabriel Dupréau, *De vitis, sectis, et dogmatibus omnium hæreticorum, qui as orbe condito, ad nostra usque tempora, et veterum et recentium authorum monumentis proditi sunt, elenchus alphabeticus* (Cologne: G. Calenium, 1569), f3^r, 70–73: “Atheismi sectatores”; Agrippa d’Aubigné, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Eugène Réaume and François de Caussade (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1877), 2:11: “Les sectes d’Atheistes”; Jacques Tahureau, *Les Dialogues non moins profitables que facetieux*, ed. Max Gauna (Geneva: Droz, 1981), 232: “des nouvelles et abhominables sectes. . . .”

¹⁵ D.P. (Daniel Pickering) Walker, “Ways of Dealing with Atheists: A Background to Pamela’s Refutation of Cecropia,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 17 (1955): 255, 260; François Laplanche, *L’Évidence du Dieu chrétien: Religion, culture et société dans l’apologétique protestante de la France classique (1576–1670)* (Strasbourg: Association des publications de la faculté de théologie protestante, 1983); Luc Racault, *Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity During the French Wars of Religion* (Aldershot: St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History, 2001). The need for more attention to Renaissance apologetics readily appears in the extensive bibliography found in Angers, *L’Apologétique en France*, and in Don Cameron Allen’s *Doubt’s Boundless Sea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964).

¹⁶ Tahureau, *Les Dialogues*, ix: “fantasies sacrilèges.” Max Gauna puts his finger on the paradox that lies at the heart of these accusations: “Respect for religiousness appears universal in the sixteenth century,” he comments, yet this respect expresses itself “against the Atheists,” “Le respect pour la religiosité paraît universel au seizième siècle . . . contre les athées—ce qui veut dire contre la conduite amoral, déréglée, qui sans la religion sévirait de par le monde” (*ibid.*, xlvi–xlix). In a similar vein, Don Cameron Allen asked, “Why must the existence of God and human immortality be expounded every thirty days for almost two centuries?” (*Doubt’s Boundless Sea*, ix–x). Georges Minois lists other examples of this suspicion, *L’Histoire de l’athéisme: Les incroyants dans le monde occidental des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 84. On this paradox in general, see Robert N. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 23.

their humanity and become “brutish beasts” living as “pigs.”¹⁷ The terms used to qualify them sought to send shivers down the reader’s cortex: one commentator, in attempting to equate them with the great medieval outsider, proposed the epithet of “spiritual lepers.”¹⁸ Insofar as atheists fell outside traditional categories of evil (Satan himself could not deny God’s existence), they assumed an unstable, neither-fish-nor-fowl form: “amphibians and Hermaphrodites of Religion,” claimed one writer, while another concocted a two-week self-help program to cure “all the Hermaphrodites of France of their atheism.”¹⁹

At once everywhere and nowhere, the atheist’s elastic shape stretched to accommodate richly imaginative reembodiments. Reaping the benefits of the blank slate offered by the category, writers of the least talent often displayed their greatest verve in decrying atheism. One piled calambour upon alliteration in his untranslatable accusation of atheists who “mettent le souverain bien au souverain rien . . . gazouillent souvent, cajolent, rient toujours . . . Heliogabales mignons en relief, demoyseaux et douillets de haute graisse. . . .”²⁰ Here, as in other instances, the pious pen appears more gleeful in talking about impiety than it does in rehearsing orthodoxy.

WE ARE ALL ATHEISTS

And yet, the more extravagant their figure, the more common atheists also became—to the point that many writers remarked on their troubling proximity with Christians. “I quake to think,” one opined, “that such monsters are to be found amongst them that bear the name of Christians”; another wondered at “how many despisers of Religion one meets with at every step . . . among those which bear the name of Christians”; and yet another contended that such monstrosities “converse familiarly among men, bearing the same face, form, and fashion as men while pretending to be Christians.”²¹

¹⁷ Jeremy Corderoy, *A Warning for Worldlings, or, a Comfort to the Godly, and a Terror to the Wicked Set Forth Dialogue Wise, betweene a Scholler and a Trauailer* (London: Th. Purfoot, for L. Lyle, 1608), A7r; Georges Pacard, *Theologie naturelle ou recueil contenant plusieurs argumens prins de la nature contre les epicuriens et atheistes de nostre temps* (Niort: A. André, 1611), “dédicace” signed 5 June 1574, 4: “transformé en bestes brutes”; Pierre Viret, *L’Interim fait par dialogue*, ed. Guy Mermier (New York: P. Lang, 1985), 113: “vrais porceaux.”

¹⁸ Laurent Pollot, *Dialogues contre la pluralité des religions, et l’Atheisme* (La Rochelle: J. Haultin, 1595), 2^r: “lepreux spirituels,” following a traditional interpretation of lepers as “figures of false doctrine” originating in Augustine, continuing through the Middle Age, and revived in the Renaissance through Luther’s commentaries on Luke 17: 11–19 in 1521, translated into Latin by Bucer, and from the Latin to French by Antoine du Pinet. See Martin Luther, *Exposition de l’histoire des dix Lepreux*, in *Chemins de l’hérésie: textes et documents*, ed. Eugénie Droz (Geneva: Slatkine, 1971), 2:133–34.

¹⁹ François Garasse, *La Somme theologique des veritez capitales de la religion* (Paris: S. Chappelet, 1625), 61; Jonathas Petit de Bertigny, *L’Anti-Hermaphrodite ou le secret, tant désiré de beaucoup, de l’advis proposé au Roy pour reparer par un bel ordre, et legitime moyen aussi facilement, qu’insensiblement, tous les desordres, impietés, injustices, abus, meschancetez, et corruptions qui sont en ce Royaume* (Paris: J. Berjon, 1606), 14: “guairir tous les hermaphrodites de France (en trop grand nombre) de leur ateisme.” On links between the perception of hermaphrodites and the Wars of Religion, see Kathleen Perry Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

²⁰ Translated flat-footedly as “placing the highest good in nothingness . . . often warbling, cajoling, and always laughing . . . son-worshipping courtiers in relief, soft-skinned and well-fattened young men,” André Valladier, *Metanealogie sacree, Sermons sur toutes les Evangiles du Caresme* (Paris: P. Chevallier, 1616), unnumbered and unsigned dedicatory epistle.

²¹ La Primaudaye, *Suite de l’Academie françoise*, 2^r: “J’ai horreur qu’entre ceux qui portent le nom de Chrestien, et qui en ont quelquesfois reçu les marques et seaux en l’Eglise de Jesus Christ, y a de tels monstres,” trans., 332; Philippe du Plessis de Mornay, *De la verité de la religion chrestienne: contre les Athées, Epicuriens, Payens, Juifs, Mahumedistes, et autres Infideles* (Anvers: Ch. Plantin, 1581), 2a1^r: “combien de contempteurs de Religion il rencontre à chaque pas . . . entre ceux qui se nomment Chrestiens,” trans. Philip Sidney [and Arthur Golding], *A Woorke Concerning the Trewnesse of the Christian Religion, written in French: against atheists, Epicures, Paynims, Iewes, Mahumetists, and other*

Guillaume de Rebreviettes must surely stand as a minor apologetical author at best; “no need to read it,” advises one of the only notices his book has received in modern times, “but this copy is a very interesting specimen of bookbinding craft from the period. . . .”²² Yet, Rebreviettes’s curious diatribe does achieve one moment of note when he suddenly whirls in his tracks to address the unsuspecting reader: “Let us see whether, thinking to judge the Atheist, we are not also guilty of impiety and irreligion.” The Gospels’ injunction to “judge not lest you be judged” leads him to wonder, “Are we Christians or Pagans, or neither one nor the other?”²³

Rebreviettes’s “inner atheism” reflected increased standards of confessional integrity that construed common lapses in conduct as evidence of full-blown unbelief. Yet, the fact that by the first years of the seventeenth century the term “atheist” had nearly eclipsed uses of “libertine,”²⁴ an accusation far better suited to censuring free living, implies that what ultimately fascinated contemporaries was not the vicarious observation of licentiousness but, rather, the very idea that a person might exist without faith. Doubt had become radicalized: from a condition inherent in the work of faith—considered as a lifelong process—doubt had come to replace pride as the “first sin that possesseth all men; and it is the last.” For “unbelief is more deeply rooted in us, than we be aware of”; indeed, as surmised one minister, many “imagine that they believe when they do not.”²⁵

Martin Fotherby judged that “there be but too too many men that have their belief so imperfect in all of them, that it is mingled with much hesitation, doubting, and wavering: so that, the best of them may say with him in the Gospel, *Lord I believe, help my unbelief* (Mark 9.24).”²⁶ Innocent Gentillet found everyone “generally guilty of atheism” for having stood back and allowed such impiety to take root and spread in the first place.²⁷ The example of Saint Thomas led Nicholas Bownd to question his own faith as “full of doubting and wavering”; others could “be true believers in general, and yet unbelievers in many particulars.” The doubting apostle had merely voiced doubts common to all: “few or none,” he concluded, truly believed.²⁸

infidels (London: [John Charlewood and George Robinson] for Thomas Cadman, 1587), π4^r; Pierre Charron, *Les Trois Veritez contre les athées, idolatres, juifs, mahumetans, heretiques, et schismatiques* (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1593), 3: “plusieurs monstres y a parmy le monde, qui conversent familerement entre les hommes, et ont le visage, la forme, et la façon humaine, voire qui font la mine, et tiennent la contenance de Crestiens.”

²² “Catalogue,” *Bulletin du bibliophile et du bibliothécaire*, 13th ser. (January 1858), 717: “L’ouvrage est peu de chose par lui-même . . . mais l’exemplaire est un bien curieux spécimen de l’art de la reliure à l’époque . . . on n’a pas besoin de la lire.”

²³ *L’Impieté combatue par des infideles, ou discours moraux et chrestiens sur le Psaume 13. de David par lesquels on peut voir que les anciens Idolatres Grecs que Romains ont detesté avec David les Athées et les fruicts de l’Atheisme* (Paris: F. Huby, 1612), 271, 277: “Voyons si pensans blâmer l’Atheiste, nous ne sommes pas aussi, coupables d’Impieté et d’irreligion,” “Sommes nous Chrestiens, ou Payens, ou ny l’un, ny l’autre?”

²⁴ Louise Godard de Donville, *Le Libertin des origines à 1665: un produit des apologistes* (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1989), 96–104.

²⁵ William Perkins, *A Treatise of Mans Imaginations: Shewing His Naturall Evill Thoughts* (Cambridge: J. Legat for S. Waterson, 1607), 33, 32, 50.

²⁶ *Atheomastix: Clearing foure Truthes, Against Atheists and Infidels* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1622), B2v.

²⁷ *Discours sur le moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix un royaume ou autre Principauté*, ed. C. Edward Rathé, *Anti-Machiavel* (Geneva: Droz, 1968), 194: “les uns sont remplis de toute impieté et atheisme qu’ils ont appris de Machiavel; et les autres, qui deussent resister que telles impietez ne prinssent racine, les laissent croistre et augmenter. Tellement que nous sommes tous en general coupables de l’atheisme.”

²⁸ *The Unbeleefe of S. Thomas the Apostle: Laid Open For the Comfort of All That Desire To Beleeve* (Cambridge: Cantrell Legge, 1608; London: J. Legat, for R. Alott, 1628), 26, 25, 30, 52.

Few or none . . . Everyone, it turns out, was an atheist. This was precisely *not* the kind of claim that religious “outsiders” made: dissidents more often than not sought in heterodoxy distinction for themselves, and they would have been loathe to share this singular status by attributing it so widely to others. Montaigne’s well-known statement that most only “believe” they believe begins to appear less unorthodox or exceptional than first appears: “Others, in greater number, make themselves believe it, being unable to penetrate what it means to believe.”²⁹ In fact, one minister’s judgment of his fellows, “For if they believed there was a God in heaven and a true religion . . . they would be entirely different than they are” resembles Montaigne’s “If we believed in him . . . we would love him above all other things. . . . The best of us does not fear to outrage him.”³⁰

Consider one English sermon reworked for publication. Principal conduit of Bèze’s theology in England, favorite target of Arminius, and popular controversialist who could outsell Calvin himself, William Perkins hardly counts as an outlier. Yet, speaking on “man’s natural thoughts concerning God,” he contended that atheism “is in the corrupt mind and Imagination of every man . . . not one excepted.”³¹ Even those who *think* they believe harbor the opposite opinion: “these two thoughts, *There is a God*, and *there is no God*, may be, and are both in one and the same heart . . . as light and darkness in the same house.”³² The paradox no longer exhausts itself in tacit unbelief inferred from overt worldliness (the popular accusation that behavior gives the lie to claims of faith), but now inheres in the duplicity of the mind itself:

A man cannot always discern what be the thoughts of his own heart: There be in man two kinds of cogitations, or as one may say reasons: the first is a single cogitation, whereby a man simply thinketh, or knoweth, or judgeth this or that; and this is properly called the *mind*: The other is a reflex cogitation or reason, whereby a man judgeth that he knowest or thinketh this or that; and it is commonly called *Conscience*. . . . [C]onscience can not do his duty in giving true testimony concerning man’s Imaginations: but a man may think evil, and yet his conscience not tell him: and therefore we may not say, because we feel not these evil thoughts in us, therefore we have them not. . . . [T]herefore we must be earnest with our selves in searching our own hearts, to find out this [atheism within] and such like abominations that be in us.³³

What could have led Perkins, against the logic of his own assertion about the mind’s unknowability, to “know” it contained atheism? Calvin might well have encouraged him to specu-

²⁹ *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, 422: “Les autres en plus grand nombre se le font accroire à eux mesmes, ne sçachants pas penetrer que c’est que croire,” trans., 322; Frédéric Brahami, *Le Travail du scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2001), 59–65.

³⁰ Pierre Viret, *Le Monde à l’empire et le monde demoiselle fait par dialogues* (Geneva: G. de Laimarie, 1580), 480–81: “Si nous le croyons . . . nous l’aimerions au dessus de toutes autres choses. . . . Le meilleur de nous ne craint point de l’outrager”; *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, 444: “Car s’ils croyoient qu’il y eust quelque Dieu au ciel et quelque vraye religion, selon laquelle il fallust regler sa vie, et rendre conte d’icelle au jugement de Dieu, ils seroyent tout autres qu’ils ne sont,” trans., 324.

³¹ *Treatise of Mans Imaginations*, 34 [sic for 32]; William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism: Or, The Way to the New Jerusalem As Set Forth in Pulpit and Press from Thomas Cartwright to John Lilburne and John Milton, 1570–1643* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 65, 91. Perkins found appreciation in Geneva, and Calvin’s old associate, Simon Goulart, translated one of his works, *La Manière de bien heureusement mourir* (Geneva: J. Chouet, 1604); see Leonard Chester Jones, *Simon Goulart, 1543–1628: Étude biographique et bibliographique* (Geneva: Georg, 1917), 637–38.

³² *Treatise of Mans Imaginations*, 35 [sic for 33]–34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 51 [sic for 52]–54, 59.

late in this direction, in affirming that “the abyss of our evil is beyond our comprehension.”³⁴ Despite some claims, the idea that one cannot know God “except and only through the radically limited capacities of the human mind” does not constitute a post-Enlightenment notion, but a fundamental contention of the Reformation.³⁵ But Perkins’s division between “mind” and “conscience,” and the inscrutability of self that necessarily ensues from their discrepancy, does more than simply warn against taking faith on a confessant’s word alone. The increasingly cognitive—as opposed to social—understanding of faith transformed conviction into an irresolvable problem: when could belief ever be heartfelt enough? How could one still claim it when feelings waned or distractions arose? The very standard of absolute faith, and the interval it established between what faith now entailed and what human action might hope to demonstrate, led Perkins to claim on principle a universal atheism.

Perkins’s unconscious differs starkly from modern conceptions: it constitutes not so much a faculty of its own as a limit placed on consciousness, confirming it as peculiarly human compared to the divine’s all-encompassing scope. Once Perkins has sketched out an etiology reaching back to original sin, he shows little further interest in studying the mind’s deeper reaches. The unconscious constitutes a wound to human identity more than its fountainhead.

For all that, Perkins does not assert unconscious unbelief as an accidental, contingent phenomenon; he claims it in principle as an ineluctable, defining feature of postlapsarian humankind. Atheism now seems to lie at the very root of Christian belief, as reconfigured through the absolute, volitional rhetoric of Reformation confessionism. For Calvin, such an insight revealed the superiority of religious self-knowledge over classical philosophy’s exploration of the human psyche: “the philosophers label the immoderate incitements of the mind as ‘vices,’ they have reference to those which are outward and manifested by grosser signs. They take no account of the evil desires that move the mind more secretly.”³⁶

Nor does such thinking content itself with a tidy dichotomy by which belief might always appear conscious, unbelief unconscious. Although Talal Asad confidently credits Descartes as “identifying ‘religious belief’ as a phenomenon of ‘consciousness,’” Descartes himself held few illusions about the transparency of belief: “many people do not know what they believe, since believing something and knowing that one believes it are different acts of thinking, and the one often occurs without the other.”³⁷ Indeed, his own famous cogito replicates the process by which one derived great assurance in matters of faith through first positing extreme doubt, and it would not be too great a stretch to consider the famous skeptical stages of his argument as entertaining the “atheist within” familiar from apologetics.

³⁴ *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, ed. Jean-Daniel Benoit (Paris: J. Vrin, 1960), 3:117: “un tel abysme de mal en nous, qu[’il] surmonte mesmes nostre sens,” trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:643.

³⁵ Cf. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *The Fundamentalism Project* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1:818.

³⁶ *Treatise of Mans Imaginations*, 1:128, 2:50: “quand les Philosophes parlent des immodérés mouvemens de nostre cœur, il s’entend de ceulx qui apparoissent par signes visibles. Quant est des mauvais desirs qui incitent le cœur plus secrètement, il les répute pour néant,” trans., 1:284 (I have modified the translation to bring it closer to the French).

³⁷ *Œuvres*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1965), 6:23: “plusieurs l’ignorent eux mesmes; car l’action de la pensée par laquelle on croit une chose, estant différente de celle par laquelle on connoist qu’on la croit, elles sont souvent l’une sans l’autre,” trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1:122; Edwin Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 177; Talal Asad, “Comments on Conversion,” in *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, ed. Peter van der Veer (New York: Routledge, 1996), 269.

Thus, some of the most perceptive observations made about atheism recognized that it might offer no more clear-cut an option than faith. Apologists often surmised that overt, conscious atheism was accompanied by unconscious belief; Henri Estienne was only one of many to denounce those who “notwithstanding the gnawing worm of an accusing conscience, counterfeit themselves to be *Atheists*.”³⁸ Geoffroy Vallée, though himself executed for atheism, similarly thought humans incapable of following through on it: “His mouth claims there is no [God] but his conscience, ever restless, betrays him.”³⁹

More important, such stipulations about the mind participate in a seismic reordering of the mental world under the intense pressure that modern religious discourse brought to bear on the conception of the conscience. In place of the old doctrine of “implicit belief”—that if one duly completed the rituals and obligations imposed by the church, such tacit acquiescence could lead to salvation—Renaissance reformations substituted a new model of “implicit unbelief.” The notion that, despite the impression that one believes, one might nevertheless harbor, unawares, doubt over the divine opens deeply unsettling vistas on the nature of faith predicated on a “religious unconscious.”

It is thus no accident that such a peculiarly modern-sounding description of the mind as unknowable to itself should have arisen when it did, and in a religious context rather than, say, a philosophical or even a medical one. The intense earnestness and ceaseless self-examination onto which Perkins’s analysis opens constituted the natural and inevitable conclusion of the new ideal of adopting a confessional identity. In one sense, then, such fingernail biting follows a tendency to reduce piety to procedures for the examination of a guilty conscience.⁴⁰ But, from a wider perspective, it reveals the structural role the unbelief played in the process of building confessionalized identities.

CHRISTIAN ATHEISM

Rebreviettes and others provide ample evidence that, by the century’s close, such developments had spread beyond the confines of “Protestant” thinking. Although much comforted in his conviction from his struggles at the possessions of Loudon, the Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin similarly surmised, “Unbelief on the part of humans is so great and mental resistance against faith so natural . . .”; against earlier assumptions that atheism was intrinsically “unnatural” or “against nature,” not to mention “insane,” Surin unambiguously concluded: “although the profession of atheism is no ordinary thing among Christians, nevertheless it is a temptation that forms easily in the mind.”⁴¹

³⁸ L’Introduction au traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes, ou, Traité préparatif à l’Apologie pour Hérodote, ed. Paul Ristelhuber (Apologie pour Hérodote) (Geneva: Slatkine, 1969), 1:188: “non-obstant le remors de conscience qu’ils sentent, veulent contrefaire les athéistes,” trans. [Richard Carew?], *A World of Wonders: Or an Introduction to a Treatise Touching the Conformitie of Ancient and Moderne Wonders* (Edinburgh: A. Hart & R. Lawson, 1608), 73.

³⁹ *La Béatitude des Chrestiens, ou le Fleo de la Foy* (n.p., [1573]), A6^v: “Sa bouche profere quil ny en a point [de Dieu] mais sa conscience l’accuze, laquelle n’a jamais repos.”

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Des Scandales qui empeschent aujourd’huy beaucoup de gens de venir à la pure doctrine de l’Evangile, et en desbauchent d’autres*, ed. Olivier Fatio (Geneva: Droz, 1984), 71, 82–83.

⁴¹ *Triomphe de l’amour divin sur les puissance de l’Enfer en la possession de la Mère supérieure des Ursulines de Loudun, exorcisée par le Père Jean-Joseph Surin, de la Compagnie de Jésus et Science expérimentale des choses de l’autre vie*, ed. Jacques Prunaire (Grenoble: J. Millon, 1990), 131, 343: “L’incrédulité des hommes est si grande et la dureté de l’esprit contraire à la foi leur est si naturelle . . .,” “quoique la profession de l’athéisme ne soit pas une chose ordinaire parmi les chrétiens, néanmoins c’est une tentation qui se forme assez facilement dans l’esprit”; cf. Michael

This was the insight stirring restlessly below and within the argument of many apologetics. Generalized as a universal condition of fallen humankind, atheism expressed a general dilemma facing all those who underwent Renaissance reformations of piety. Once faith ceased to exist as a matter of fact—indicating that one was a member of a parish in good standing—and began to designate a deliberately assumed identity that resulted from ongoing personal practices of self-scrutiny and self-obligation with respect to the prospect of an “inner atheism,” it came to seem more honored in the breach than in the keeping.

This location of religious difference within worshippers, for which the inner atheist proves only one of the most extreme examples (along with the “devil within” popularized in the contemporary epidemic of possessions), ended up replacing the traditional accommodation between belief and doubt with a stark opposition between hypostatized versions of faith and unbelief. Whether writers deduced the existence of atheism from biblical texts that alluded to unbelief (Ps. 10:4; 14:1; Jer. 5:12; Ws. 2:1–6; Eccl. 3:18–21; Mark 9:24), or merely inferred it from conduct sufficiently immoral, the fact remained that they experienced a pressing need to talk about unbelief.

The surge of disquiet over atheism, beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century and quickly spreading across Europe, reflected a growing discomfort with doubt, created by the Reformation’s longtime pressure to make confessional identity both manifest and unequivocally a function of “belief.” Thus, this Renaissance “abortion of the brain” may have served an end similar to that of witch trials for those who, in the midst of cultural upheaval, needed to convince themselves of their own irreproachable orthodoxy.⁴² One wonders whether, in the popular imagination, the missionary impulse did not increasingly begin to provide the same reassurance about Christian civilization as a whole and serve as an outward expression of apologists’ “inner crusade.”⁴³



I am a Catholic and an atheist, thank God.

—Luis Buñuel

Whether unbelief proved a matter of opportunity, as for Surin, or of principle, as for Rebrevettes, whether more manifest in behavior (Bownd) or the structure of the mind (Perkins), the ultimate truth about belief proves to be that one never knows whether one believes—that one can only *believe* that one believes. On the one hand, this conditioning of faith by faith opens the way to various, rich practices of skepticism of the self, and the limit set here upon self-consciousness will be that from which Descartes and succeeding philosophers struggle to rescue

MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 164–72.

⁴² Nicolas Chichon, *Atheisme des pretendus reformez à l’occasion d’une responce d’Isaac Cuville Pretendu Ministre de Couë* (Poitiers: P. Poirier, 1620), â5^v: “un avorton de cervelle”; Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 10–31, 341, 416–49. Garasse, with only very slight hesitation, explicitly associates the two (*Doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps, ou pretendus tells* [Paris: S. Chappelet, 1623], 1006). On the rise of the witch as scapegoat during the Wars of Religion, see H.R. (Hugh Redwald) Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 138–40.

⁴³ Donville, *Le Libertin des origines à 1665*, 407: “croisade intérieure.”

a secular conscience distinct from the religious domain. On the other, predicating faith upon itself suggests a mode of self-endorsement that has come to characterize certain religious discourses today.⁴⁴

The “I believe . . .” of the *credo*, contained in confessional formalizations and practiced in professions of faith, did not constitute a simple description of fact, but rather a reflexive assertion that publicly purported to align one’s mental states with doctrine.⁴⁵ It constituted an affirmation not of family, of community, or of a shared culture, but a second-order claim about the state of one’s own conscience. Alignment of one’s conscience in this way nevertheless implied a public and presupposed antagonism: Bruno Latour finds inherent in belief “a *polemical* mode of relations,” and Donald Lopez concurs: “The statement, ‘I believe in . . .’ is sensible only when there are others who ‘do not.’”⁴⁶ The fact that those others might exist only in theory made them no less effective an adversary.

Arguments against atheism did not unwittingly inspire doubt so much as they responded to this new prominence attributed to doubt within voluntaristic faith.⁴⁷ Thus did Christianity construct an atheism to suit its purposes, a “Christian” atheism that shadowed believers and formed, in fact, belief’s shadow. “You speak of atheists, but is there any atheist if you are not one?” challenged one pamphlet.⁴⁸ Intended as a partisan slur, the question nevertheless echoes strangely down the corridors of time. We are left with the impression that confessionalized Christians’ belief in atheism proved as strong as their faith in God. A

⁴⁴ Akeel Bilgrami describes making a “fundamental commitment,” through what he calls “self-endorsement,” as one in which people work to reinforce a choice in response to imagining themselves choosing differently (“Notes toward the Definition of ‘Identity,’” *Daedalus* 135, no. 4 [2006]: 7).

⁴⁵ Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 71.

⁴⁶ Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 271; Donald S. Lopez, “Belief,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 33.

⁴⁷ Bouwsama portrays Calvin’s preoccupations with lukewarm Protestants as stemming from deep anxieties over his own faith (*John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988], 32, 101), a position nuanced, but maintained by Denis Crouzet (*Jean Calvin: vies parallèles* [Paris: Fayard, 2000], 27–29, 54, 101); cf. Richard Muller’s scathing criticism of such portraits, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 79–98. Similarly, one recent biography of Luther portrays the reformer locked in “day wars” with other theologians as an outlet for his own “night wars” in which he struggled with deeply personal uncertainty (Richard Marius, *Martin Luther, the Christian Between God and Death* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999], xiii–xiv, 59–66, 103–4, 111, 214–17, 465, 481–82). Rather than psychologizing preoccupations with unbelief, however, one can more fruitfully regard them as structurally necessary to confessional expressions of faith.

⁴⁸ *La contre Ligue et responce à certaines lettres* (N.p.: n.p. 1589), 16: “Tu parles d’Atheistes: mais y a-il Atheiste si tu ne l’es?”