

NICK SPENCER



ATHEISTS

THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

B L O O M S B U R Y

Atheists: The Origin of the Species

Nick Spencer

B L O O M S B U R Y
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*Dedicated to the memory of Robin Joyce (1973–2013), endlessly fascinated by its subject, present at
its conception, not at its conclusion. Badly missed.*

Atheism is often merely a variety of Christianity. In fact, several varieties. There is the High Church Atheism of Matthew Arnold, there is the Auld Licht Atheism of our friend Mr J. M. Robertson, there is the Tin Chapel Atheism of Mr D. H. Lawrence. And there is the decidedly Low Church Atheism of Mr Russell.

T. S. Eliot, reviewing Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 1927

Atheism should always be encouraged (i.e. rationalistic not emotional atheism) for the sake of the Faith.

T. S. Eliot to Richard Aldington, 24 February 1927

Atheist as I am sir, atheist as I am, no man shall stand between my soul and my God!

Heckler at a Christian Socialist Lecture, quoted in F. C. Bettany

Stewart Headlam (John Murray, 1927)

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Nick Spence
London, 2017

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a terrible monster that lived in the sky. No one had ever seen it because it lived a long way away, and because it was invisible, but everyone knew it was there because a long time ago it had shown itself to some very clever men.

These very clever men explained how the monster had one head, three bodies and a thousand eyes with which it could see into people's souls. They told terrible tales of what the monster would do if it got angry but also of how kind it was if people would only worship it without thought or question. They explained how the monster had given them a powerful magic, which, if used rightly, would protect the world from evil.

Sometimes the monster would get angry and when it did the clever men would offer it sacrifices by dragging people into market squares where they would burn them alive, just to show the monster how much they loved it.

The people listened to the very clever men and believed them. But they still yearned to be free from the monster.

And then, one day, a few brave men, who had only ever pretended to believe in the monster, unearthed a chest of strange metal. The chest had been hidden by an earlier, wiser, freer people, who had lived in the land before the monster came, and had known a better way of life.

Ever so slowly, the men began to work the metal, which they called 'reason', using it to forge a new weapon, which they called 'science', and they used 'science' to attack the monster, and the very clever men. They had to be very careful at first because if anyone was caught using 'science', they would be dragged into market squares where they would be burned alive, and indeed this was how many men lost their lives.

But these were brave men, not to be fooled by fables or cowed by threats. Their band multiplied and their weapons grew in number and power until one day, a brilliant, reclusive rebel invented a super weapon, which he called 'evolution', which could punch clean through the monster's armoured scales.

After that, the attacks increased in frequency and ferocity until one day the rebels were able to show the people what they had long known themselves. The monster had never actually existed. It was just a tale told by the very clever men to keep themselves in riches and power. Slowly the truth spread and although some very clever men still cling to riches and power, and some very stupid ones still believe them, gradually, wonderfully, the world is being set free.

Or so the story goes. Every culture has its ancient creation myth, and this is atheism's, albeit one that is only about 150 years old. Atheism emerged in Europe through the services of reason, science and evolution and in the teeth of often brutal religious opposition. In as far as the history of modern atheism is told, it is often a variant of this myth.

This book tries to tell a different story. This is not to say that atheism's creation myth is wholly untrue. Creation myths are rarely wholly untrue. In this instance the tale is true enough to be believable, even if it's not true enough to be true. Modern atheism did indeed emerge in Europe in the teeth of religious, i.e. Christian, opposition. But it had only a limited amount to do with reason and even less with science. The creation myth in which a few brave souls forged weapons made of previously unknown material, to which the religious were relentlessly opposed, is an invention of the

later nineteenth century, albeit one with ongoing popular appeal. In reality, this book argues, modern atheism was primarily a political and social cause, its development in Europe having rather more to do with the (ab)use of theologically legitimized political authority than it does with developments in science or philosophy.

One way of understanding this is to go back to the earliest years of the Christian church. In the first and second centuries, in as far as Christians were noticed at all, it was for their political disobedience, their apparently cannibalistic and incestuous rites, and their atheism.¹ That Christians, of all people, should be accused of atheism will sound odd to modern readers. The reason lies partly in the fact that, like the Jews who faced similar accusations, early Christians had no visible idols: they appeared to worship nothing.² But it also lies in the fact that, in thus limiting their worship, they refused to recognize the divinity of the emperor.

In about AD 160, the octogenarian bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was given a choice: either denounce your fellow (Christian) ‘atheists’ and burn incense to Caesar (thereby acknowledging his divinity), or face the pyre. He chose the latter, preferring instead to call the baying crowd ‘atheists’.³ Even in the ancient world which had – we like to imagine – a tolerant and flexible attitude to religious belief, who you worshipped was intricately tied up with questions of who you obeyed and how you lived. Rejecting the gods constituted a serious threat to public order, one that demanded severe punishment. Ancient atheism, at least in its Christian incarnation, was not only about denying the powers in heaven but also defying the powers on earth.

As with ancient atheism, so with modern: religion, in the form of Christianity, was the foundation of European culture in the early modern period. Belief in God determined the way people lived, the way they were governed and the way they structured society. It regulated their days, weeks and years, their births, marriages and deaths. It told them what to hope for and what to fear. It legitimized communities, kingdoms and empires. It explained the past, present and future, earth, heaven and the heavens, human origins, purpose and destiny. It was the key in which all life, human and natural, was composed, if not necessarily played.⁴ In the words of the historian turned Conservative politician John Redwood, early modern Europe was ‘God-ridden’: ‘Whenever a man took up his pen and attempted to write about the weather, the seasons, the structure of the earth, the constitution of the heavens, the nature of political society, the organization of the Church, social morality or ethics he was by definition taking up his pen to write about God.’⁵ The implications for atheism were clear. To undermine religion was, in the words of the English Chief Justice in 1676, ‘to dissolve all the obligations whereby the civil societies are preserved’.⁶

Recognizing this helps free us from our own (historically rather unusual) conviction that since belief in God is an intellectual activity focused on questions such as ‘Who made the world?’ or ‘Does a supernatural realm exist?’, atheism is an intellectual activity that just comes up with different answers. Less about science disproving God, or even about God himself, the history of atheism is best seen as a series of disagreements about authority, the concept in which various concerns – does God exist, how do we know, how should we live and who should we obey – coalesce.

This is sometimes recognized in the more academic literature on the history of atheism. Thus Victoria Frede, in her fine history of the emergence of Russian atheism between the 1820s and 1860s, has observed that ‘to treat atheism as a doctrine is ... to miss its most salient feature. In Russia, it was less a statement about the status of God than it was a commentary on the status of educated people in an authoritarian state that sought ever more forcefully to regulate the opinions and beliefs of its subjects.’⁷

For ‘Russia’ read ‘the West’: the social and political contexts were critically different from one country to another (which helps explain why atheism took different forms in different places) but the religious-political nexus against which atheism emerged was omnipresent. Wherever you went,

deny God was not simply to deny God. It was to deny the emperor or the king who ruled you, the social structures that ordered your life, the ethical ties that regulated it, the hopes that inspired it and the judgement that reassured it.

This, then, is the first contention of this book: the history of atheism is best understood in social and political terms. It leads to a second contention. Atheism is too readily treated as a merely destructive phenomenon, a stripping away of structures, rituals and beliefs until it arrived at the naked ape that was always there waiting to be revealed. This is misleading. From the outset, atheism was a constructive and creative phenomenon.⁸

The mistake is wholly understandable. Atheism is, in the first instance, a parasitic creed, defined by what it is not, what it is against. Accordingly, a huge amount of energy has been deployed throughout its history – a wearying amount, if the historian is honest – in showing how wicked, stupid, corrupt, violent, ignorant, misleading and malign religion – for the most part Christianity – is. Retarded and self-deluding Christians, malevolent and manipulative priests, incomprehensible and meaningless doctrines, corrupt and hypocritical practices, delusional and dehumanizing hopes: these provide the staple diet of European atheists, many of whose writings have only rarely been burdened by a commitment to balance or a fear of repetition.

Yet, this is only part of the story. Being parasitic in the first instance does not mean being parasitic in everything. Precisely because Christianity was the foundation, the walls, the streets and the public order of European civilization, atheism was faced with the need to construct a different earthly city if its destruction of the existing one was ever going to be successful. ‘God does not exist’ might be an acceptable stance in the seminar room, but beyond it must either become ‘God does not exist so ...’ or risk forfeiting public attention. Failure to complete the sentence rendered its first clause irrelevant, unpersuasive or simply dangerous. Anarchy appealed to no one.

The need to complete the sentence, for atheism to construct as well as destroy, leads to a third contention. We should, if we take points one and two seriously, talk about atheisms rather than atheism. The different ways in which different unbelievers have completed the sentence has generated many creeds – the word is appropriate in the context – that are sufficiently different enough to be seen as a cluster of positions, rather than a single one. We do better to speak of a family of atheisms, rather than one single, holy, catholic and apostolic atheism.

This ‘family’ can be glimpsed in the huge range of words that have been used interchangeably with atheist over the last four centuries. These include Bright, Cartesian, communist, determinist, Epicurean, existentialist, fatalist, freethinker, Hobbist, humanist, infidel, irreligious, libertine, materialist, monist, naturalist, Nietzschean, rationalist, sceptic, secularist, Spinozist and unbeliever, to name only the less abusive terms. Few of these are exact synonyms but that is precisely the point. All these terms have been used of people who rejected God, but did so for different reasons, with different strengths of feeling, and drawing different conclusions. All were atheists (or, at least, alleged to be) but they adhered to subtly different atheisms.

If the socio-political nature of the history of atheism is poorly recognized, the existence of atheisms is even less so. Few historical accounts take seriously, or even notice, the range of atheisms present in European culture, one honourable exception being Susan Budd’s unjustly neglected study of *Varieties of Unbelief* in Britain in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries.

Things are changing. A 2012 article in the *History of Human Sciences* charts the differing ‘scientific’ and ‘humanistic’ courses within ‘the evolution of atheism’.⁹ The British Society for the Philosophy of Religion dedicated its 2013 conference to ‘Atheisms’. A sociological study recently published by the University of Tennessee outlined six distinct types of atheist: intellectual atheist, anti-theists, activists, seeker-agnostics, non-theists and ritual atheists.¹⁰ Examples like these, together

with new academic ventures, such as the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, suggest that the study of atheisms is coming of age.

Atheism is not an exclusively modern or Western phenomenon. The classical world had its non-believers, as does the non-Western one, although the precise nature of eastern 'atheism' often puzzles Westerners, and indeed became a major point of debate for the Catholic mission to China in the eighteenth century. That recognized, the focus of this book is modern (post c. 1500) and predominantly 'Western' (from Russia to the US) largely for reasons of length and authorial competence. But more is needed: it is nearly a century since the Austro-Hungarian theatre critic, novelist and sceptical agnostic Fritz Mauthner published his massive four-volume history of atheism.¹¹ We are overdue another such offering.¹²

This book is separated into four chapters, although not in honour of Mauthner's four volumes which begin in the classical world. [Chapter 1](#) takes the story from the Renaissance to the start of the eighteenth century and explains how atheism became a possibility in the Western mind. It argues that all the building blocks of an atheistic worldview – God absent, spirits non-existent, souls invented, creation unnecessary, matter everything (and eternal), providence imaginary, universe blind, life by chance, miracles impossible, morality an entirely human affair, and humans no more than sophisticated animals – were in place, or at least available, at a very early stage, but that it took the massive theological, epistemological and political crisis precipitated by the Reformation to gather those blocks and turn them into a foundation. Atheism was possible by the late 1600s, certainly by the 1740s, even if it was not legal, let alone desirable.

[Chapter 2](#) takes the story on to the end of the eighteenth century, in which a handful of pioneers, the most prominent in France, put forward the first openly and unapologetically atheist arguments since the classical period. It is also in this period that different countries start to take different paths. France, Britain and the new United States developing different cultures of atheism not so much on account of different philosophical or scientific cultures, but because of the different nature of the theo-political cultures. A rigidly authoritarian Catholic *ancien régime* in France created deep wells of moral indignation on which atheists could draw. The more tolerant settlement in Britain limited those wells, and the 'wall of separation' between church and state in America effectively drained them. If we seek a reason why atheism was the dog that didn't bark in what became the most self-conscious modern, scientifically developed country on earth, it lies here.

[Chapter 3](#) moves into the nineteenth century, the age of atheist promise. Here great systems of thought rubbed shoulders, explaining the past, inspiring the present and predicting the future, putting religious belief in its right place, and then transcending that place, moving people on to a true understanding of historical progress, a better grasp of economics, or a more rational form of ritual and practice. For all the very real civic and social burdens placed on them at the time, this was the moment to be alive as an atheist, when progress predicted the death of God as humanity moved into broad sunlit rational uplands.

It didn't turn out quite like that and the final chapter takes the story into the twentieth century, when atheism faced and created problems previously hidden or unimagined. This was the age when Nietzsche lifted the veil on much hypocritical moral posturing by his atheist peers; when logic positivists gleefully hammered home the final nail in the coffin of God-talk, only to find the whole thing was made of papier-mâché and that God hadn't been in the coffin in the first place; when the experience of two world wars left many in Europe, particularly in France, doubting the human credentials of atheism; and, most painfully, when attempts to build atheist societies populated with new men (and the occasional new woman) in Russia, China, Albania, North Korea and elsewhere ended up humiliating, enslaving and killing on a scale that made previous religious wars look like

playground scuffles. It was an age in which atheism came out and came of age, and it wasn't pretty.

The British philosopher Anthony Kenny ended his *New History of Western Philosophy* by outlining how the American Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga resurrected the ontological argument for God at the end of the twentieth century. This, Kenny reminds us by quoting Bertrand Russell's own *History of Western Philosophy*, was once thought a closed case. The argument, wrote Russell, 'was invented by Anselm, rejected by Thomas Aquinas, accepted by Descartes, refuted by Kant, and reinstated by Hegel. I think it may be said quite decisively,' Russell opined, 'that ... modern logic has proved the argument invalid.' Plantinga's reformulation, Kenny remarks, serves as 'a salutary warning of the danger that awaits any historian of logic who declares a philosophical issue definitively closed'.¹³

The ontological argument is mercifully absent from these pages, but the salutary warning retains its power. Those who have pronounced the sentence of death on God, or on atheists, have done so prematurely. Both are here to stay.

Possibilities

Types of atheism

‘There is nothing but infidelity, infidelity, infidelity’: An early modern plague

Early modern Europe was crawling with atheists. In Italy, wrote Roger Ascham, in 1551, ‘a man may freely discourse against what he will, against whom he lust, against any Prince, against any government, yea against God himself, and his whole religion’.¹ The Englishmen who lived there, later lamented, are ‘Epicures in living and atheists in doctrine.’² It was a land, according to one seventeenth-century writer, of ‘pox, poisoning, and atheism’.³ Voltaire spoke for many when he wrote in *The Sage and the Atheist* that ‘Italy, in the fifteenth century, was full of atheists – and what was the consequence? Cases of poisoning were as common as invitations to supper’.⁴

Italy was particularly bad, long infected by pagan authors, but nowhere was immune. Inquisitorial records from fifteenth-century Spain offer examples of universalism, materialism and unbridled scepticism aplenty. France was no better. The Jesuit Francois Garasse identified five different types of atheism in his country – ‘furious and enraged atheism’, ‘atheism of libertinage and corruption of manners’, ‘atheism of profanation’, ‘wavering or unbelieving atheism’ and ‘brutal, lazy, melancholic atheism’ – all of which were, of course, reprehensible.⁵ Marin Mersenne, a French theologian, philosopher and mathematician of repute, claimed there were as many as 50,000 atheists in Paris in the early seventeenth century.⁶

Northern Europe was not spared the shame. When Jakob Friedrich Reimann published his history books in German lands in 1713, he explained how atheism had been a live issue since the twelfth century when it arose in the wake of Averroism and Emperor Friedrich II.⁷ According to Matthias Knutzen, himself a prominent atheist, there was an underground society of 700 sworn atheists in late seventeenth-century German academic circles.

Holland was particularly notorious during the seventeenth century as the European capital of free thought and infidelity. It was in Holland, for example, that the Devil, witchcraft and demonic spirits were first methodically denounced and banned, albeit by Balthasar Bekker, a sincere Dutch minister. And it was in Holland that Europe’s most formidable and comprehensive atheistic system originated and took root, during Bekker’s life.

And then there was England. A *Discourse on the Present State of England*, a report to Lord Burleigh, in 1572, claimed that ‘the realm is divided into three parties, the Papists, the Atheists, and the Protestants’.⁸ The Puritan Richard Greenham claimed that ‘atheism in England is more to be feared than Popery’.⁹ Walter, Earl of Essex, complained in 1576 that in England ‘there is nothing but infidelity, infidelity, infidelity, atheism, atheism, atheism’.¹⁰ More desperately still, Thomas Nashe wrote in his *Christ’s Tears over Jerusalem*, ‘there is no sect now in England so scattered as Atheism. In vain do you preach, in vain do you teach ... how many followers this damnable paradox has; how many high wits it hath bewitched.’¹¹

So prevalent was atheism among Elizabethan intellectuals that some even formed schools, coterie dedicated to its discussion and dissemination. An official enquiry held at Cerne Abbas in 1594 into Sir Walter Raleigh and his circle of eminent Elizabethan atheists found that they denied the reality of

heaven and hell, and argued that ‘we die like beasts, and when we are gone there is no remembrance us’.¹² By 1600, the Bishop of Exeter could complain that in his diocese it was ‘a matter very common to dispute whether there be a God or not’. Seventeen years later, a Spanish ambassador estimated that the number of English atheists was somewhere in the region of 900,000,¹³ or around a sixth of the population.

Refutations were everywhere. From the late sixteenth century onwards, booksellers sold a growing number of books refuting godlessness. Texts like Philip of Mornay’s comprehensively named *Woorke concerning the trewnesse of the Christian Religion, written in French: Against Atheists, Epicures, Paynims, Jews, Mahumetists, and other Infidels* [originally written in French], or John Dove’s *A Confutation of Atheisme*¹⁴ stood on English shelves, just as André D’Abillon’s *La Divinité défendue contre les athées* and David Derodon’s *L’athéisme convaincu* did in France.¹⁵

It was all to no avail. Atheism spread, and not just among the ill-educated from whom the authorities should have expected little better. It was one thing for people like John Deryner of Grebedwyn in Wiltshire to maintain that ‘there was no God and no resurrection, and that men died a death like beasts’ (although he perhaps shouldn’t have voiced such an opinion in front of the parish children); or for Ralph Byckenell of Over Compton in Dorset to tell his minister that ‘there was no God, and that he could prove by certain arguments’ (although as Byckenell was churchwarden one might have hoped for better).¹⁶ But it was quite another when respectable men like Thomas Harriot (mathematician and astronomer), George Gascoigne (poet and soldier), John Caius (physician), and Nicholas Bacon (Lord Keeper of the Great Seal), and the Earl of Oxford were suspect.¹⁷

There were official enquiries, such as that into the Cerne Abbas circle, but they were of no avail. Atheism spread through Europe like an unspiritual plague. The former Augustinian canon and satirist Ferrante Pallavicino, for example, brought ‘heresy and atheism’ back to Italy from Germany after he had met a French soldier on campaign there. At least, that was what his biographer claimed.¹⁸

Living in a pre-scientific age, early modern Europeans would not have known about memes, but had they done so, they surely would have thought atheism spread like one. It was everywhere, a veritable virus of the mind. Indeed, according to Robert Burton, it was best treated like an illness. ‘Atheism, idolatry, heresy, hypocrisy, though they have one common root, that is indulgence to corrupt affection, yet their growth is different, they have divers symptoms, occasions, and must have several cures and remedies.’¹⁹

‘The word atheist is now used as the word barbarous was’: The meaning of atheism

Or perhaps not: you don’t have to read very far in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to realize that early modern Europeans did not use the word atheist in the way that we do. Nor do you have to read far to realize that they were not overly cautious in their usage. The word was thrown about with as much abandonment as Communist during the McCarthy years, and to a similar effect.

Atheist was, in essence, a smear. The word could be used of those who (allegedly) denied divine providence, and of those who (allegedly) denied God’s involvement in the world; of those who denied the immortality of the soul and of those who denied the existence of hell and heaven; of those who denied the doctrine of creation and of those who denied the existence of the spirit world. It was used by Catholics of Protestants, who denied the authority of God’s representative on earth, and by Protestants of Catholics, who evaded and ignored God’s word in scripture by placing their trust in worldly authority. It could, in other words, be used very loosely to denote any heterodox belief that smelled even a little bit like the denial of God.

More extravagantly still, it could be used – indeed was used, universally – to describe those whose behaviour was anti-social or immoral. The Jacobean author Nicholas Breton put this well in his 1633 book of didactic character sketches, *The Good and the Badde, or Descriptions of the Worthies and*

Unworthies of this Age. In this he described the Atheist, 'or Most Bad Man', as a figure of desperation, 'who dares to anything even to his soul's damnation', making 'sin a jest, grace a humour, truth a fable, and peace a cowardice'.

Breton was not done with this. The atheist, he explained, 'is the danger of society, the love of vanity, the hate of charity, and the shame of humanity ... The tavern is his palace and his belly is his god ... He knows not God, nor thinks of heaven but walks through the world as a devil towards hell.' Not much had changed by the end of the century. The deist Charles Blount observed in 1680, 'the word atheist is now used, as heretofore the word barbarous was, all persons differing in Opinion, Customs or Manners being then term'd Barbarous, as now Atheists'.²¹

At the same time as early modern Europeans threw the accusation of atheism as wide as a farm sowing seed, they also took care to define and analyse it with great precision. Francis Bacon identified four causes of atheism in his short essay on the subject – 'divisions in religion', 'scandal of priests', 'custom of profane scoffing in holy matters', and 'learned times, specially with peace and prosperity for troubles and adversities do more bow men's minds to religion' – adding that 'a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion'. Later in the century, the Cambridge Platonist philosopher Ralph Cudworth, in his massive *Treatise of Intellectual System of the Universe* outdid Bacon and outlined 14 grounds on which atheism was possible, ranging from the impossibility of the human mind to comprehend God to the evident defectiveness of Providence.

However many causes of atheism there were, there were undoubtedly numerous kinds of atheism. Perhaps in honour of the Holy Trinity, there were often three kinds. According to Laurent Pollot there were those 'who do not know the true God', those who 'doubt or even feel or speak ill of God and providence', and those who 'force themselves to erase all sentiments of divinity from their heart, and blaspheming miserably, say there is no God'.²³ According to the French Calvinist and theologian David Derodon, there were 'the refined', who were philosophical sceptics; 'the debauched', who lived immorally without care for God's laws; and 'the ignorant' whose belief was weak or inadequate.²⁴

Pierre Bayle, one of Europe's arch-atheists himself, at least in the mind of his critics, also spoke of 'three degrees of Atheism' in his influential *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. 'The first is to maintain that there is no God. The second, to deny that the world is the work of God. The third, is to assert that God has created the world by the necessity of his own nature, and not by the inducement of free will.'²⁵

Thomas Nashe's *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem* was more cautious, separating out two types of atheist, the careless, who were simply preoccupied and overwhelmed by life and forgot God, and the deliberate, who were more considered in their doubts, coming to believe, by reason, that there was no resurrection, no providence and no God.²⁶ This division corresponded loosely to the most widespread distinction of the time, made between 'practical' and 'theoretical' atheism.

Practical atheists were wicked. They were the debauched, the adulterous, the drunks, the unapologetic sinners who lived without fear of providence, judgement or the God who underpinned both. They were, according to the Swiss Calvinist Pierre Viret, those who 'do not want to be subject to either of God or of any creature, but [who want] to do everything that pleases them'.²⁷ Molière's *Don Juan* – described by his valet as 'the greatest scoundrel the earth ever bore, a madman, a dog, a devil, a Turk; a heretic, who believes neither in Heaven nor Hell nor Hobgoblin, who spends his life like the beasts that perish, a swine of Epicurus, a very Sardanapalus,²⁸ who stops his ears to all the remonstrances that can be made, and treats all we believe in as old wives tales' – was merely a more than usually colourfully drawn type of the age.²⁹

By contrast, theoretical atheists – if they existed at all ('one can be an atheist by heart, but one cannot be one by the mind' confidently declared one late seventeenth-century writer³⁰), were the

who had come to the intellectual conclusion that there was no God.

The two were not necessarily distinct. Indeed, they often blended into one in contemporaries' minds. Atheists are those 'whom debauchery, bad company, or little knowledge of good letters have corrupted that they dare to deny publicly the Being who gave them their being', wrote Derodon in 1659.³¹ Atheism was 'a disorder of the mind conceived in libertinism', according to one French Jesuit.³² All the meticulous definitions and distinctions of atheism teased out by god-fearing early moderns tended to collapse back into the mess of anti-social libertinism.

It is this that lies at the heart of the wild accusations of atheism that were thrown with such abandon from the early sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. For, to reject God was not just to reject God; it was to reject the authority structures established in his name. It was to reject the moral code that was revealed in his word and guaranteed by the promise, or threat, of his judgement. Indeed, it was to reject moral realism altogether, replacing absolute right and wrong with personal preference or, worse, moral indifference borne of materialism and determinism. Without God, wrote John Milton, 'there would be no distinction between right and wrong; the estimate of virtue would entirely depend on the blind opinion of men'.³³

In doing all this, atheism undermined the authority of prelate and prince, denying them the ability and right to maintain social order. It was because belief in God was 'the root and foundation of every polity' that atheism was understood – *felt* – as denial of entire existing order.³⁴

This was evident in the matter of oaths. Order depended on justice; justice on functioning judicial proceedings; functioning judicial proceedings on veracity; veracity on reliable oaths; and reliable oaths on that which they were sworn. No God meant, therefore, no justice. 'All moral evidence ... and confidence in human veracity must be weakened by irreligion, and overthrown by infidelity,' wrote William Blackstone in his *Commentaries on the Law of England* in the mid-eighteenth century.³⁵ To be an atheist was, in effect, to declare war on the society and culture of which you were a part. Questions of atheism were as much about what happened in this world as what happened in the next.

This explains why atheism was so feared, so hated and so punished. It also explains why in many of the instances it was used in early modern Europe 'atheist' would be more accurately rendered in modern English as 'godless' or 'ungodly'. Within the early modern mind, what you believed and how you lived were joined together, and it was not until the two could be put asunder that atheism could emerge publicly into European culture.

'All religions have been formed in the brains of men': Atheistic views

Just because someone was called an atheist, then, it doesn't mean they were. But, conversely, just because someone was called an atheist, it doesn't mean they were not. 'Atheist' may have been used with abandonment to label and libel those deemed unorthodox, suspect or immoral, but it does not follow that none of those thus accused was an atheist in the sense that we would use the word.

Whether there were atheists, in the sense of people who did not believe in God, in early modern Europe has been the subject of a significant historical debate since 1942 when Lucien Febvre published a major study entitled *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: the Religion of Rabelais*.³⁶ Françoise Rabelais' anti-clerical humour had once been taken to be more than just anti-clerical, a cipher for anti-Christian rationalism. Febvre argued that there was no evidence that Rabelais was not a believer and, more generally, that it was, in effect, impossible to be an atheist at the time. The Christian worldview and culture was so universal, so deep, so thick that it was, for all intents and purposes, impossible to think outside it.³⁷

Febvre's book on Rabelais proved influential and scholars spent many years discussing whether his thesis had merit: were there atheists in early modern Europe? The quest was handicapped by the enthusiasm with which the word was used but close historical readings showed that there were people

who disavowed Christian doctrine in such a way as to sound like atheists as the modern mind understands the term. The complicating factor was that these would-be atheists seem to go back a long way.

In the early eleventh century, two clergymen in Orléans insisted that the universe had existed from eternity, heaven and hell were fictions and the Trinity was incoherent.³⁸ The following century, a French monk called Helinant referred disapprovingly to those who believed that there was no other world and no more life after death for men than for animals. The heresy registers of Bishop Fournier of Pamiers in the early fourteenth century include accusations of religious scepticism, materialism and disbelief in the afterlife. Another inquisition, this time in Turin later in the century heard statements from individuals who admitted to believing that Jesus was the natural son of Mary and Joseph and that there was to be no punishment after death.

This was all very well for peasants but the educated also voiced similar opinions. Thomas Semer, alias Taylor, was accused of Lollardy in mid-fifteenth-century England but appeared to be guilty of much worse. He denied the existence of the soul, of heaven, hell and purgatory. He claimed that Christ was nothing but a man born of Joseph and Mary, and said the Eucharist was nothing more than bread. As far as he was concerned, the Bible was just a set of prescriptions for human behaviour of human devising to keep the peace. Semer was not alone. Other Lollards were accused of, and some admitted to, denying the Trinity and resurrection of the body. Semer's doubts, however, seem to have been particularly well developed.³⁹

In England, Lollardy was blamed for such opinions. In Spain, it was the Jews. Forced to choose between death, exile and conversion in the fifteenth century, many Spanish Jews converted. The troubles did not end there. These *conversos* were treated with widespread suspicion and hostility, often accused and often found guilty of unbelief or of showing insufficient respect during mass. Sometimes the disrespect went further, with some going on record for doubting Jesus' miracles, or claiming that he was crucified as a Jewish heretic. This was not atheism but it would find its way into atheist rhetoric a century or two later. Many of these accounts are unreliable, as Jews and others were threatened or tortured into confession. Nevertheless, inquisitorial records report so much anti-clericalism, blasphemy, obscenity, doubts about the resurrection, materialistic views of this life, scepticism about the next, use of magic, sympathy with other religions and religious universalism that it is impossible to believe it was all an invention.⁴⁰

Such views only grew in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as Reformation ideas spread, enthusiasm, heterodoxy and panic. Mid-century John Calvin launched an attack on some of the intellectuals of his day, including Rabelais, for their religious scepticism. Among other things, he accused them of publicly asserting that 'all religions have been formed in the brains of men; that we think there is a God because we like to believe it; that hope of life eternal is something to amuse idiots with; that everything said about hell is done to frighten little children'.⁴¹

Church records show that such views were genuine, rather than the product of the great reformer's febrile imagination. England offers colourful examples aplenty.⁴² In 1556, the parson of Tunstall was accused of saying that whoever believed that Christ sat on the right hand of the Lord was a fool. In 1563, Thomas Lovell of Hevingham, Norfolk, remarked that 'God the Son was not believed upon [in his own country, but driven out; and they [did] better than we do'.⁴³ Three years later, Robert Maston of Woodchurch, Kent, denied 'that God made the sun, the moon, the earth, the water'.⁴⁴ Around the same time, a man in Norfolk suggested there were 'divers Christs'. A little later, John Hilton, a London priest, confessed that he had preached a sermon at St Martin-in-the-Fields in which he had claimed that the Old and New Testaments were 'but Fables' and that the doctrine of the Trinity was not true.⁴⁵

Perhaps most notorious, at least in England, was the case of the playwright Christopher Marlowe.

few days before he was stabbed in a Deptford pub, a 'Note' of his religious opinions was delivered to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, which claimed that the playwright had denied Christ's divinity and the authority of the Bible, while asserting that Moses was a ' juggler ' and religion nothing more than a means of social control. Subsequent evidence claimed that he also rejected miracles, was hostile to prayers and blasphemed the Trinity. More scandalous still, both the note and the evidence of the playwright Thomas Kyd recorded that Marlowe was of the opinion that ' St John the Evangelist was a bed-fellow to Christ and leaned always in his bosom, [and] that he used him as the sinners of Sodom '.⁴⁶ Moreover, Marlowe was not content to keep such views to himself. ' He persuades men to atheism ... and utterly scorning both God and his ministers ', the Note claimed.

The ' Baines Note ', as it is known, is lurid, and its author a paid informer who admitted elsewhere to scoffing at religion. Other evidence for Marlowe's atheism is hardly cleaner. But, there does seem to be a general consensus that Marlowe's religious views, whatever exactly they were, were ' monstrous ', ' damnable ', ' horrible ' and ' dangerous '. Had Marlowe not been stabbed when he was, he might have endured a worse fate still.⁴⁷ Such as that of Geoffroy Vallée and Giulo Cesare Vanini: Vallée was a nobleman from Orléans. He was executed as an atheist in 1574 for advocating reason as an ' antidote ' to fear and dogma, despite attacking atheism and libertinism, as well as Christianity, in the short pamphlet that earned him the pyre.⁴⁸ His case was soon forgotten, unlike Vanini's who became one of Europe's first atheist martyrs. Born in 1585, and educated by Jesuits, Vanini joined the Carmelite, another Catholic order, and then left Venice for England in 1612, haunted by rumours of extreme unorthodoxy. He spent the following years travelling in Flanders, Paris, Liguria, Lyons and Toulous and writing two books that were eventually posthumously published.

Vanini appeared to accept the eternity of matter, mocked the doctrine of creation, argued against the existence of non-material beings, and the human soul, claimed that miracles had natural explanations, and said that the only true worship was worship of nature. Religions, he claimed, including Christianity, were fictions invented by priests and princes to secure power. Mankind, like other animals, found his earthly origins in putrefaction. Immorality was the product of diet or illness. He even cast doubts over the very existence of God. This was a remarkably comprehensive list of heterodox opinions, hardly less incendiary than Marlowe's provocative blasphemies. Not surprisingly, the authorities were scandalized by them and dragged Vanini to the pyre in 1619.

Vanini sounds as if he were an atheist, although not necessarily a coherent one. But how should one categorize Menocchio, an Italian miller and autodidact who argued with the parish priest, was tried, sentenced, imprisoned, released, and then, eventually retried and burned by the Inquisition? Menocchio was not simply an argumentative troublemaker. He argued that ' earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together ' in a chaotic mass – ' just as cheese is made out of milk ' – from which worms appeared. ' The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels ', including the God worshipped by humans.

Whether or not these various opinions did constitute a considered ' theoretical ' atheism, rather than a contemptuous indifference or ' practical ' atheism (or, in the case of Menocchio, just extreme eccentricity) is impossible to say at this distance. It is telling, though, that however much contemporaries dismissed atheists as merely mad, bad or non-existent, they still expended considerable energy in refuting and disproving them. André D'Abillon claimed, like many of his peers, that atheist views were inane, and then spent 250 pages proving God's existence from arguments from miracles, demonology, prophecy and conscience, among others. This was a lot of energy to spend fighting a shadow.

New worlds

'On the Nature of Things': ancient worlds

Whether atheism, in any coherent and recognizably modern sense, existed in early modern Europe is therefore, questionable; but whether *atheistic views* did is not. Such views – variously sceptical, blasphemous, anti-clerical, materialist – clearly could be heard if you were prepared to spend time with the wrong company. They might sometimes cohere into something more substantial, as with Vanini or something more comprehensively pugnacious, as with Marlowe, or something more peculiar, as with Menocchio. But most remained variations on a Christian theme, albeit sometimes highly discordant variations.

This is reflected in the history of words. The Middle Ages had a sophisticated vocabulary for heresy, which had developed over the centuries, but it had no specialized language for unbelief.⁴⁹ It was not, as we have seen, that there was no one who denied core Christian tenets. Rather, it was that all such beliefs were understood as variants, albeit sometimes enormous ones, of Christianity. So dominant was the Christian culture and worldview in which virtually everyone grew up, that it was almost impossible to think outside it. That began to change slowly in the fifteenth century, from which time visions of different worlds emerged. The word for atheist was coined, in Latin, French and English, in the first half of the sixteenth century, to capture the unprecedented worldview these new worlds presented.⁵⁰

Three of these new worlds would be especially important for the development of atheism. From the mid-fourteenth century onwards educated Europeans became increasingly aware of their rich, long forgotten and by now entirely foreign cultural past. Scholars scoured monasteries for much-copied manuscripts of long lost texts. Greek scholars moved west ahead of advancing Islamic armies bringing precious codices. Bibliophiles and poets took it upon themselves to recover and celebrate their classical heritage. For the most part, this was accommodated within the existing medieval mindset. The majority of humanists were, like Petrarch, devout Christians, and although the cumulative effect of their work was to lift the Augustinian gloom about human nature, the dormant texts that began to circulate from the 1400s did not radically challenge Christian thought.

Or, rather, most of them did not: some ideas and some texts were more threatening than others. Pyrrhonian scepticism, so called because it could (theoretically) trace its origins to Pyrrho of Elis in the third century before Christ, argued that humans could never be sure whether reliable knowledge was possible, and so should withhold judgement on all questions concerning knowledge.⁵¹ For those who liked their religion clear and certain, this was not an appealing prospect. The sole surviving Pyrrhonian texts, written by Sextus Empiricus in the late second century, were all but unknown in the Middle Ages, but they re-emerged in the mid-fifteenth century and were destined to play a significant, if unpredictable, role in the development of atheistic thought.⁵²

More directly menacing was the rediscovery of Lucretius' poem *De rerum natura* or *On the Nature of Things* in a monastery in southern Germany in 1417. Lucretius was a Roman poet philosopher of the first century BC of whom little else is known. *De rerum natura* is his only surviving work and although influential at the time – it was praised by Cicero, Virgil and Ovid – it had disappeared with the ancient world.

Over 7,000 lines long, the poem offered a view of the world that was entirely different from the conventional Christian one. Lucretius' universe was made up of tiny, indivisible particles derived from the 'atomos' of Democritus. These were eternal and uncreated, ever combining and separating to make the familiar objects of our universe in endlessly random and unpredictable ways.

The universe itself had no creator, no designer and no plan. Nature was constantly in flux, providence an illusion and human beings as accidental and incidental as anything else. The human soul, made up of the same atomic material as the human body, was no less mortal. Eternal life was fantasy. Spiritual bodies, such as angels or demons, were illusions. The gods existed but were entirely

uninterested in human affairs. Humans could know nothing of them and should not waste their time trying. Organized religion was not only delusional but harmful. The goal of human life was the increase of pleasure and the reduction of pain, best achieved by ridding oneself of delusions and appreciating the true nature of things. Death was nothing to fear.

Technically not atheistic itself, *De rerum natura* nonetheless outlined a coherent worldview that would form and inform atheistic thought in Europe for centuries. Its impact was slow in coming. Considered for, although not added to, the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books in 1549, it attained a kind of contraband caché. Printed editions carried warnings and disavowals of its teaching. Montaigne's *Essays* contain nearly 100 direct quotations from the poem. Latin versions appeared regularly throughout the seventeenth century. When Thomas Creech translated it into English in 1682 it was heralded as the most complete system of atheism in print. All major radical thinkers in the Enlightenment seemed to have read it. Baron D'Holbach translated it into French. His friend Jacques André Naigeon owned numerous editions and commentaries. Denis Diderot drew on it deeply for his controversial *D'Alembert's Dream*. Claude Adrien Helvétius quoted from it for the epigraph to *On the Mind*. Julien Offray de La Mettrie used it as inspiration for his *The System of Epicurus*.

Taken separately, many of the poem's ideas might be integrated into a Christian worldview. Atomism, for example, while understood as a materialist threat by many, could be accommodated: the world had to be made from something, after all. Francis Bacon was inclined towards atomism for a while, seeing in it a better physical basis for belief in God than the traditional one of 'four mutable elements, and one immutable fifth essence'. A little later, the French philosopher Pierre Gassendi took the atheistic sting out of the doctrine by giving God a prominent role in creating the atoms and using them to construct the world. More generally, Lucretius had lived before Christ and that always offered a get-out-of-jail free card. Could he be expected to know any better in the age before God's full revelation?

Such tactics were ultimately inadequate to the task, however. Lucretius' universe was coherent in its materialism, its diminution of the human, its abandonment of providence and of moral realism. It presented another universe, from which a coherent atheistic world could be constructed.

'One's nation, one's country, one's home determines one's religion': Foreign worlds

If the ancient world provided the picture of another world, so did other worlds.⁵³ Long known by rumour, ancient and foreign cultures became more vivid from the early years of the sixteenth century. Increased presence and trade in Southern and Eastern Asia alerted Western Europeans to cultures and traditions of scholarship that were ancient – perhaps even more ancient than those of the Mediterranean – and that had ideas of God that were hard to square with those familiar to Christendom. Worse still, some cultures, such as that reported by missionaries in China, appeared to have no concept of God at all.

This was a serious challenge to the argument that belief in God was universal. Indeed, it was worse even than this. Not only were the Chinese apparently atheistic but they had a longstanding, highly achieving and apparently fully functioning society. This was strong medicine. Continental Europe was convulsed in the 1720s when Christian Wolff argued that Confucius' moral maxims, and the Chinese society they grounded, showed how natural reason, free from revelation and even belief in God, could attain moral truth.⁵⁴ Journeys west were easier to accommodate. The cultures they revealed were primitive, so the fact that they had apparently no knowledge of the Christian God mattered less. Indeed, it made positive sense, serving as an open invitation for mission.

New worlds could provide a different kind of provocation, however, with accounts of foreign lands raising issues about pleasure, ethics and moral relativism. Such issues need not be atheistic. One of the earliest literary depictions of the new world was Thomas More's *Utopia*, whose inhabitants, who

largely tolerant of different beliefs, drew the line at those who denied the soul's immortality or divine providence. 'For it stands to reason, if you're not afraid of anything but prosecution, and have no hopes of anything after you're dead, you'll always be trying to evade or break the laws of your country, in order to gain your own private ends',⁵⁵ remarks More's Raphael Hythloday, neatly capturing the early modern fear of atheism.

More's *Utopia* goaded and questioned Christendom; other new worlds could be more challenging. Unlike those presented by the Chinese or by Lucretius or other ancient writers, the challenge lay not in the prospect of sophisticated and cultured alternatives to Latin Christendom. Rather, it was simply that there were many different ways of seeing the world, each with its own particular intellectual, moral and spiritual dimensions. The religious truths, so long deemed self-evident to Western Christians, were nothing of the kind.

One of the most contentious examples of this was Pierre Charron's *De la sagesse*. Born in 1541, one of 25 children, Charron was educated at the University of Paris and became a respected preacher and theologian, a reputation that was damaged by his magnum opus published in 1603, shortly before he died. Despite the fact that an earlier work had vigorously attacked atheists as part of its broadside against Calvinists, *De la sagesse* was deeply suspect, described as a 'seminary of irreligion', and earning him accusations of being a 'secret atheist'.⁵⁶

Charron was a disciple of Michel de Montaigne and his master's rejection of all forms of dogmatism runs through *De la sagesse*. 'Just think how much we have learnt from the discovery of the New World, the East and West Indies ... who can doubt that in the foreseeable future there will be further discoveries,' Charron enthused.⁵⁷ Like his master, he was acutely aware of how an expanding horizon relativized everything.

Charron's universe, like Lucretius', was fluid. 'Everything is subject to birth, alteration and death to the influences of changing times, places, climates, stars, and territorial divisions.'⁵⁸ Everything was contestable, 'subject to contradiction and dispute'.⁵⁹ This might be an acceptable Christian view. Charron had gone on to explain how such diversity was as a result of the fall, and other cultures were therefore open to judgement and/or ripe for conversion. But he did no more than gesture very vaguely in that direction. In place of judgement, Charron observed how 'whatever is held to be impious and unjust, disgraceful in one place, is pious, just and honourable in another', and that 'one cannot name a single law, custom, or belief that is universally either approved or condemned'.⁶⁰

Most seriously, Charron relativized religion. 'One's nation, one's country, one's home determine one's religion ... We are circumcised or baptized – Jews, or Muslims, or Christians – before we know we are human beings. It is not we who choose our religions.' 'If religion was of divine establishment,' he wrote, 'shining out with God's glory, it would be solidly established in our hearts, and would have consequences that would seem, and would indeed be, miraculous'.⁶¹ Religions were, in effect, all the same. 'All discover and publicise miracles, prodigies, oracles, sacred mysteries, saints, prophetesses, festivals, articles of faith, and beliefs necessary for salvation ... each pretends to be better and truer than the others'.⁶²

The way in which Charron denied universal values, saw superstition within all religious practices and renounced proselytism and efforts to save sinners was too much. *De la sagesse* was soon placed on the Index. The idea that other cultures relativized Christianity, however, was to be a persistent one in atheist polemic. When David Hume wrote, over a century later, that 'some nations have been discovered who entertained no sentiments of religion ... and no two nations, and scarce any two men have ever agreed precisely in the same sentiments',⁶³ he was developing ideas, in an atheist direction, that the discovery of new worlds had forced upon his predecessors.

'I count religion but a childish toy': Unsettling worlds

Ancient worlds and new worlds opened up alternatives to early modern Christians, but such alternatives need not be so distant in space and time. A more blatant alternative worldview was opened up by a man whose name became synonymous with a particularly cynical form of practical atheism.

Niccolo Machiavelli was a product of renaissance humanism. His father, Barnardo, was a lawyer whose enthusiasm for the *studia humanitatis* shaped his son's education and helped him secure an appointment, in 1498, as Secretary of the Ten of War, Florence's foreign affairs and war committee.

In effect the city's highest-ranking diplomat, Machiavelli led embassies to, and spent months in, the courts of the French King, the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor and others. Over the next 14 years, he was immersed in the cloak-and-dagger world of renaissance diplomacy and realpolitik, noting the folly of weakness, inflexibility and vacillation of some and the strong, decisive, cold-blooded determination of others.

Machiavelli himself fell from grace in 1513, when the republican regime he served collapsed and he was then suspected of conspiracy against their Medici successors, tortured and imprisoned. These experiences marked him, disabusing him of any lingering idealism and precipitating several works that would see him vilified for centuries.

The best known of them, *The Prince*, was written in 1513, although not published until after the author's death. A failed attempt to curry favour with Lorenzo de' Medici, it is an inadvisedly honest tract on statecraft, which carefully and thoroughly subverts the, by then well-established, humanist genre. Machiavelli ridiculed the conventional examples in which virtuous statecraft triumphed. He talked up some of the most brutal rules of his age and was withering about traditional humanist virtues. Generosity might be essential for the man seeking power, but it is dangerous and foolhardy for the ruler in power. Of compassion he writes limply, 'I'm sure every leader would wish to be seen as compassionate rather than cruel', before going on to explain that 'excessive compassion leads to public disorder, muggings and murder ... It's much safer to be feared than loved'. Similarly with honour: it was fine, up to a point, but 'a sensible leader cannot and must not keep his word if by doing so he puts himself at risk'. The ruled were not better than their rulers. Most people were fundamentally self-interested and unreliable, he argued: 'they are ungrateful and unreliable; they lie, they fake, they're greedy for cash and they melt away in the face of danger.'

Saying this kind of thing out loud may have been impolitic and upsetting for humanist presuppositions but that was no crime. Humanism, after all, was itself a reaction to the rather bleak vision of human sin, which had long dominated the medieval mind, and from which God, through the intercession of his church, rescued humanity. Where Machiavelli's was inexcusably inflammatory was in showing that theological cure was no better than the sinful poison. *The Prince's* short chapter on 'church states' is a masterpiece of subtle, savage anti-ecclesiastical irony. Church states, Machiavelli observes, are upheld by ancient religious institutions that 'are so strong and well established' that they 'keep their rulers in power no matter what they do or how they live'. 'Only Church leaders possess states without defending them and subjects without governing them'.

The New Testament is completely absent from *The Prince* and Machiavelli's few Old Testament examples are lauded for their martial abilities rather than their godliness, being effectively indistinguishable from the book's non-biblical heroes. 'Moses, Cyrus, Theseus and Romulus couldn't have got people to respect their new laws for long if they hadn't possessed armed force.'

Divine interest and intervention made little difference. 'We can hardly say much about Moses since he merely carried out God's orders,' Machiavelli disarmingly says, before going on to say of the other rulers, 'when we look into the specific actions each took and the institutions they established we'll see they don't differ that much from what Moses did under divine guidance.'

As if this were not enough, there was the book's deafening silence when it came to any final divine

judgement, and the author's notorious willingness, indeed advice, to fake piety: 'There is nothing more important than appearing to be religious.' Altogether, the book wrapped up self-serving amorality, power-worship, false piety and religious disregard into a neat, frightening package.

The Prince failed in its attempts to curry favour and Machiavelli's last 14 years were spent as a man of letters. His later works do not have *The Prince*'s shocking honesty, but nor do they do much to deny its implications. Why were people 'in those ancient times ... greater lovers of Liberty than in the times,' he asks in Book II of his *Discourses on Livy*? The answer is Christianity. For while 'our Religion' has 'glorified more humble and contemplative men rather than men of action', placing 'the highest good in humility, lowliness, and contempt of human things', the religion of the ancients 'places it in the greatness of soul, the strength of body, and all the other things which make men very brave'. The result is 'to have rendered the world weak and a prey to wicked men, who can manage it securely'. This was Nietzsche long before Nietzsche.

Machiavelli's world was cold and amoral, replacing right with might. Religion was a tool of political control. God was, for all intents and purposes, absent. The law was, at best, a temporary expedient measure. What is good, what is noble, what is generous, what is right: all are irrelevant. What matters is survival and power.

Some modern critics have argued that Machiavelli was a Christian.⁶⁴ If so, he certainly wasn't seen as such by his contemporaries, becoming a shorthand for godlessness, feigned piety, amorality, cynicism and political violence. 'I count religion but a childish toy / And hold there is no sin but ignorance ... / Might first made kings, and laws were then most sure / When, like the Draco's, the laws were writ in blood,' proclaims Machevil in the Prologue to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. The world revealed by Machiavelli stood as a warning of what Europe would become if it denied God.

Authority and scepticism

'The Holy Ghost is not a Sceptic': Authority and scepticism

In their own ways, Lucretius, Charron and Machiavelli lifted the veil on alternative ungodly possible worlds. They were recognizable, even coherent, but they were also devoid of the comforts, illusory otherwise, of Christendom. Put another way, they showed that other visions of the world were possible but not actual, still less desirable. The opening up of these different visions of reality also, however coincided with the biggest crisis in European intellectual and political life in a millennium, which shook the ground on which human knowledge, security and life were based. This was fundamentally a crisis of authority, intellectual, ecclesiastical and political, and it made all the difference for atheism.

Latin Christendom had experienced tremors of authority before the Reformation. Some, like Lollardy, had been suppressed. Others, like the Great Schism in which two, and then three, popes claimed jurisdiction over Christendom, were negotiated. Questions of authority were not, therefore unprecedented. Martin Luther initially agreed that Christian doctrine should be judged by the criteria of Church tradition, councils and papal decrees but by 1520 he was denying the pope's authority to adjudicate over such matters, and placing scripture over and above tradition as means for evaluating truth.

This, however, left a problem: who could tell what constituted the legitimate interpretation of scripture? Was everyone's opinion equally valid? At first, this did not seem to be a problem but by the mid-1520s, when Europe witnessed a massive uprising that was exacerbated if not caused by doctrinal differences, there seemed to be validity in the accusation that elevating text over tradition meant localizing authority in sects and individuals, which invariably led to violent anarchy.

The Protestant response to this accusation varied. Luther emphasized the compulsion of conscience

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