



27 SEPTEMBER 2018

HOW TO BE AN ATHEIST IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

PROFESSOR ALEC RYRIE

My agenda for this series of lectures is summed up by the Roman Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor. 'Why,' he asks, 'was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?' The fact of that shift – the fact that in Europe and North America and their cultural offshoots, in the old Christendom, unbelief is now the cultural default and religious practice a countercultural stance that requires fairly steady effort – I am going to take for granted: we will be coming back to it explicitly in the final lecture. For now, I am happy to take Friedrich Nietzsche's famous claim – 'God is dead ... and we have killed him' – as true, or at least as a truth about western society and culture, not necessarily about God him- or herself. If I were a philosopher, I might be inclined to ask what that claim means. But I am a historian, which is a simpler creature, and so to me this sounds like a murder mystery. If God is dead, who exactly killed him, when did it happen, and what weapons were used?

The usual answers are: philosophers, scientists and intellectuals; during the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and by means of repeated bludgeoning. Spinoza in the 1660s first showed that a world without God could be philosophically coherent. Voltaire shredded the Church's moral authority, and Hume its metaphysics. Darwin explained the origins of life without reference to God. By 1882, Nietzsche was announcing a death, not committing a murder.

The main purpose of these lectures is to question that story. I think the timescale, the suspects and the murder weapon are all wrong. You have been promised some medieval atheists and I will come to them in a minute, but first I want briefly to explain why they matter. The most obvious problem with that classic timescale of the history of atheism, with its late seventeenth-century starting point, is that we can find plenty of examples of unbelief and rumours of unbelief well before that period. A preacher in Florence in 1305 warned that the question, 'how can it be that God exists?', was being 'put by madmen every day'. This sort of thing is usually dismissed on the grounds that they were madmen: this was not philosophically respectable and sophisticated atheism. If you are only interested in the history of 'atheism' as a system of ideas, then that is the end of the matter, and these lectures are not for you. What interests me is the evidence that unbelief existed in *practice* before it existed in *theory*. In which case we have not only been looking at the wrong centuries, but profiling the wrong suspects. Intellectuals and philosophers may think they make the weather, but they are more often driven by it. People who read and write books have a persistent tendency to overestimate the power of ideas. Some of us, sometimes, change our beliefs and our lives as the result of a chain of conscious reasoning. But not very often or very honestly. Our own age has forcibly reminded us that intellectual elites often struggle to bring their societies with them. Their default role is instead to tag along behind, explaining why things have inevitably turned out as they did.

The conventional story has it that philosophers attacked religion and people therefore stopped believing. But what if people stopped believing and therefore found they needed arguments to justify their unbelief? Most of us make the great choices – beliefs, values, identities, purposes – intuitively, embedded in our social and historical contexts, usually without being able to articulate why we have done so, often without being aware we have done so. If we are that way inclined, we might then assemble rationalisations for our choices: rationalisations which may be true, but true in a meagre, *post hoc* way.



And if that is true of unbelief as well as of belief, then the crucial juncture in the history of unbelief is the period *before* the philosophers made it intellectually respectable: when the raw dough began to bubble with unexplained and sometimes unwelcome energy, making it urgent that intellectuals discover ways to bake, slice and package it. It is no great surprise that Enlightenment thinkers *could* develop atheistic philosophies. Anyone who needs a philosophy badly enough will find one, and arguments against God were nothing new in the mid-seventeenth century. The question is not, where did these criticisms come from? but, why did some Europeans start to find them compelling? To answer that question, we do not need an intellectual or philosophical history of atheism: we need an emotional history.

So these lectures will mostly tell what is, in the conventional narrative, the prehistory of atheism. Only in the final lecture will we turn our attention properly to the modern world, when unbelief broke cover and emerged into the open in philosophical dress. But beneath that dress, its emotional shape has remained remarkably consistent down to the present. The two recurring keynotes of this story are anger and anxiety, and their moral consequences – but more of that as we go through. For today, what I want to do falls into two parts. First, I want to talk about what seems to have been the perennial, endemic manifestations of unbelief in the medieval world, based it should be said on pretty haphazard evidence, but I think it forms a coherent picture. Then in the second half of the lecture I want to look at how the novelties of the early Renaissance affected this picture. But first, let's meet some medieval atheists.

Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, King of Sicily, Germany, Italy and Jerusalem was perhaps the most powerful ruler of the Middle Ages. And according to Pope Gregory IX, he was an unbeliever. In 1239 the pope accused Frederick of calling Moses, Jesus Christ and Mohammed 'charlatans' and 'deceivers' who, between them, had fooled the entire world; of scoffing at the notion 'that a virgin could give birth to the God who created nature'; and of maintaining that 'one should accept as truth only that which is proved by force of reason'. The charges were certainly exaggerated, but it is true that Frederick had been asking his favourite scholars some alarming questions. Where is God? Where are Heaven, Hell and Purgatory? What is beyond Heaven? What is the soul? Is it immortal? If so, why do the dead never return?

Rumour had it that one of those scholars, Piero della Vigna, had suggested to Frederick that Moses, Christ and Mohammed were frauds, and had indeed written a book arguing the case, called *Of the Three Impostors*. There is in fact no evidence that this book ever existed. Yet it became notorious on the basis of its wickedly alluring title alone. For nearly five centuries dreadful tales of it were whispered. Eccentrics and troublemakers hunted for it. A Swedish princess offered a bounty for a copy. It was easy enough to meet someone who had met someone who had once seen the book; not to get any closer. Finally, in the early eighteenth century, enterprising French atheists actually wrote a book to go with the fearsome title. Inevitably, the result was an anti-climax.

If we want to understand unbelief in the Middle Ages, *Of the Three Impostors* is a good place to start. Like medieval unbelief itself, the book existed in the imagination. It was a rumour, not a manifesto; an inarticulate suspicion, not a philosophical programme. That vagueness was what made it powerful.

It has been suggested that atheism in premodern times was simply impossible. This is obviously true in one sense: the Greek word *atheos*, whose meaning was more like 'godless' or 'impious' than 'claiming that there is no God', did not make its way into Latin until 1501, and not into European vernaculars until after that: the word *atheist* first appears in English in 1553. Behind that semantic point sits a more serious issue: that when medieval and early modern Europeans talked about atheism or unbelief, those words had a much wider range of meaning than they do now. As well as actual denials of God, they included what was sometimes called 'practical atheism', that is, living as if you do not believe there is a God even if you claim that you do believe; and also what we might call 'constructive atheism', that is, attacking fundamental Christian doctrines such as the immortality of the soul in such a way that, whether or not they claimed to believe in a deity of some kind, they had nothing that we could call a religion. And I have to say I rather like this broad definition, and I think that the story of unbelief and godlessness is more important and interesting than that of atheism as narrowly defined. On its own, whether or not you believe there is a God has no more consequences than whether or not you believe there are other universes parallel to our own. As John Gray puts it, someone with 'no use for the idea of God ... [is] in truth an atheist', whatever such a person claims to believe or disbelieve.



Here it is traditional to invoke the great French literary historian Lucien Febvre, whose argument that unbelief was impossible in premodern times is now routinely dismissed by historians of the subject. But Febvre's point was subtler than that. He was well aware both that premodern Europeans frequently attacked religion, sometimes in scabrous terms, and also that they readily accused one another of unbelief. His point was simply that like *Of the Three Impostors*, these attacks and accusations had no intellectual substance. As such, he concluded with magnificently Gallic disdain, unbelief of this kind

‘did not matter, historically speaking. ... It hardly deserves to be discussed, any more than the sneers of the drunkard in the tavern who guffaws when he is told the earth is moving, under him and with him, at such a speed that it cannot even be felt.’

It is an intriguing comparison. Before we leave the tavern in search of some more genteel atheists, let's hear the drunkard out.

How do we, here today, know that Febvre's drunkard is wrong and that the earth is indeed moving? Very few of us have the astronomical skill to determine the question for ourselves. We believe it because we are universally told it is true by learned authority; because it is an important part of a wider web of knowledge we have about the world around us; and because we have seen very persuasive pictures explaining it. And yet, like Febvre's drunkard, we sometimes struggle to hold onto the fact. We still say that the sun ‘rises’ even though we know it does no such thing. We treat the ground beneath our feet as if it were stationary. It *feels* stationary. For most practical purposes, it might as well be.

To wonder nowadays whether the earth really is moving, you do not need to be a drunkard or a fool. You need to be independent-minded and self-confident. You need to be suspicious: ready to believe you are being lied to. And it helps if you are not very well educated. If you are woven too tightly into our civilisation's web of knowledge, you will not be able to kick against it. To see this at work, I recommend visiting the websites of modern flat-earth organisations – which, in their stubborn refusal to be hoodwinked by the intellectual consensus of their age, are the closest thing our own world has to medieval atheists. Of course, whether you are a modern flat-earther or a medieval atheist, your lack of deep engagement with the dominant intellectual systems of your age makes your doubts possible but also blunts their power. You may have some slogans and hunches, but you won't be able to refute astronomers who come at you with their orbits and laws of motion, or theologians wielding essences and ontologies. You can only reply with the mulish wisdom of the sceptic told to admire the stitching on the emperor's clothes: I just don't see it.

Independent-minded, suspicious and uneducated people were in plentiful supply in medieval Europe. It is no coincidence that the original story of the emperor's new clothes dates back to fourteenth-century Spain. Raw and inarticulate as this scepticism was, it should not be ignored. Let's have a few examples.

In 1273 a merchant named Durandus de Olmeira was hauled before officials of the bishop of Rodez, in southern France. He confessed to having told a friend that profit was better than virtue. When his friend teased him with not caring for his soul as well as his body, he had replied, ‘Do you think there is any soul in the body other than the blood?’ As a young man, he said, he used to cross himself piously, but it never did him any good, nor had his fortune suffered when he stopped. He also admitted to having scorned the miracle of transubstantiation, in which the sacramental bread is transformed into Christ's body. ‘Even if the body of Christ were large as a mountain, it would long ago have been eaten up by priests.’ Or again, in 1299, Uguzzone dei Tattalisina, a notoriously tight-fisted moneylender from Bologna, was accused of dismissing the Bible as a mere fiction. He allegedly told Mass-goers that they might as well venerate their dinner as the consecrated bread; claimed that the True Cross, Christendom's most venerated relic, was just a piece of a bench; and said that ‘there is no other world than this’. Another Mass-mocking moneylender from the same city was more explicit in denying that there was any afterlife or resurrection. ‘When,’ he asked, ‘did you see the dead return to us?’

The Church courts did not find these men's beliefs especially surprising. They were, after all, grasping, stone-hearted money-grubbers. It made sense that they should have no faith. When a monk like Nicholas, the abbot of Pasignano, was accused in 1351 of various acts of fraud and extortion, including threats to castrate anyone who



dared testify against him, it was positively a relief to discover that he also believed that it was better to be rich than to be in holy orders, or that he treated the liturgy with contempt. Perhaps these people lived wicked lives because they had abandoned their faith; perhaps they had abandoned their faith in order to live wicked lives. Either way, angry and contemptuous unbelievers of this kind did not threaten the religious world around them. They reinforced it.

The same was true of an even angrier species of ‘unbelief’: blasphemy. In 1526 a servant boy in Toledo was hauled before the Spanish Inquisition for saying, before multiple witnesses, ‘I deny God and Our Fucking Lady, the whore of the cuckolded arsehole’. That was unusually inventive, but it was not unique. Blasphemy was by far the most common offence brought before the Inquisition: typically, words uttered during a quarrel, in a tavern or at a gaming-table. As Thomas Aquinas argued, these blasphemies were mere insults to God, arising from eruptions of rage. And what more potent way to insult God than to deny him altogether? Like another common medieval oath – cursing your own parents – this was about posturing. It was playing Russian roulette with your own soul, to show that, since you are plainly not afraid of God, you are not afraid of anything.

Blasphemers insulted God but did not forget him. If they were angry with him, that was simply a recognition of his power. After all, if you believe in an omnipotent God, everything is his fault. The irony, as pious commentators observed, was how constantly God’s name was on blasphemers’ lips. But nor was their defiance trivial. Blasphemy had the effect of scent-marking places – alehouses, gambling-dens, brothels, armies and navies – where different religious rules applied, where a certain amount of demonstrative impiety was expected or even rewarded. These irreligious spaces could serve as reservoirs of angry, scornful or contemptuous unbelief, from which it could seep out into the wider culture. It is no coincidence that these were all thoroughly male spaces. Blasphemy was very gender-specific. Women, it was said, blasphemed less than and differently from men, typically challenging God’s justice or cursing their own births.

Even if you did not exactly mean it when you defied God, your words had consequences. If God did not strike you down for your wickedness, then you might reach for the dread words more readily next time – or for worse, because blasphemy depends on shock value, and is therefore liable to galloping inflation. Even if you were sure there really was a God, by saying out loud that there was not you had peered over a cliff-edge. Perhaps you had only been trying to scare yourself, or others, and had no intention at all of actually leaping off. But you had looked, you had imagined, and felt a thrill that was more than just fear. If the cliff ever began to crumble beneath you, you would not be entirely unready.

Losing your temper with God might feel good, but it did not achieve very much. A more practical target for your anger was his self-appointed representatives on earth. A great many supposed cases of unbelief in the medieval church courts were plainly much more about resentment of the clergy than about Christian doctrine. The Montauban peasant who claimed in 1276 that he would not confess his sins to a priest even if he had had sex with every woman in the village was no more analysing sacramental theology than he was actively eyeing up the entire female population; he was railing against one of the most widely-resented pinch points of priestly control over lay people. Likewise the Spaniard who was accused before the Inquisition in the 1490s for saying that, ‘I swear to God that this hell and paradise is nothing more than a way of frightening us, like people saying to children “the bogeyman will get you”’. This is resentment at being manipulated, not speculation about the fate of the dead.

I do not mean to downplay these incidents. Quite the opposite. Amateur theological speculation was a minority activity in the Middle Ages, but resentment of priests was a sport for all. Everyday life offered plenty of potential points of friction between priests and people. Any such quarrel might lead to a priest falling back on his authority as God’s representative, forcing a disgruntled lay person to enlarge his quarrel to include God too. A dispute over an illicit pat of butter in Lent could very quickly escalate into something much more serious.

In practice, one issue above all tended to trigger these escalations: the medieval clergy’s most outrageous claim to spiritual authority. In the Mass, every priest presided at a daily miracle, in which bread and wine were wholly but undetectably transformed into Christ’s body and blood. This doctrine of transubstantiation was always controversial and counterintuitive. Hence the procession of medieval miracle stories in which unbelievers suddenly saw the ritual at the altar as it ‘truly’ was: a broken human body, a blood-filled chalice. These visions were not



rewards for faith, but judgements on unbelief, and the stories ended with horrified doubters begging for the dreadful vision to be hidden from them. The Church did not downplay the difficulty of believing in the sacrament. It revelled in and accentuated it. The reason Christ's body looked and tasted like bread, according to the encyclopaedic medieval theologian Peter Lombard, was 'so that faith may obtain its merit'. Believing was meant to be hard. Denials of this miracle were not unthinkable: they were necessary. Every Doubting-Thomas story needs a sceptic.

Of course, most opponents of transubstantiation weren't unbelievers as such, but Christian heretics, or indeed Jews or Muslims. But the Inquisition's dragnets did not discriminate. Some at least of their catch look like no kind of standard-issue heretic. For example, in 1448 the bishop of Worcester interrogated a man named Thomas Semer. He was looking for members of the so-called Lollard sect, but it quickly became clear that Semer was a different fish. Like the Lollards, he denied transubstantiation, but he went on to dismiss the Mass entirely as an empty ritual. He rejected the Bible – which Lollards venerated – as a cynical tool of social control. He denied Jesus Christ's virgin birth, claimed that paganism was better than Christianity, and insisted that the devil was stronger than God. Unlike most Lollards, he persisted in his denials and was burned at stake. What we cannot know is to what extent this kind of scepticism was an ever-present feature of medieval religion's sea floor, only stirred up by trawling inquisitors; and to what extent it specifically flourished in those corners of the ocean which were filled with heretical variety and which therefore attracted inquisitors' attention.

Another of Semer's shocking denials provides an important clue: he rejected any notion of the soul, of heaven or of hell. Wherever we find unbelief in premodern Europe, we find this 'mortalist' claim – that when we die, we die. Mortalism is of course completely compatible with belief in a God, but it was more than just an attack on a specific doctrine. Medieval and early modern Christianity was intensely focused on salvation, judgement and the state of the dead. Strip that out, and while you might still have a God, you have precious little religion.

So we find, for example, Jacopo Fiammenghi, an elderly Italian monk whose decades of indiscipline, fraud and intimidation finally caught up with him in 1299. He insisted that 'there was not another world, neither heaven nor hell, but only this world'. When asked about his soul, *anima*, he replied, 'a peach has an *anima*' – the same word meant the fruit's stone. In 1491 another Englishman, Thomas Tailour, confessed teaching 'that when a man or woman dieth in body, then also dieth in soul; for as the light of a candle is done out ... so the soul is quenched by the death of the body'. That image of the blown-out candle was much cited. Medieval churchmen certainly believed that mortalist beliefs were widespread enough to need regular denunciation.

Those churchmen, who liked their heresies neatly classified, had a ready-made label for all this: Epicureanism. The ancient philosopher Epicurus, whose name is now associated with pleasure-seeking, was notorious in the Middle Ages both for his radical mortalism and also for his strictly naturalistic account of the universe. If the gods existed in this worldview, they were little more than a curiosity. Dante made room for Epicureans, amongst them the Emperor Frederick II, in the sixth circle of Hell: they are condemned to lie forever in opened tombs, unwillingly immortal. But in fact there is no evidence that this was any 'Epicurean' sect or tradition existed. Most of the unbelieving voices we can recover sound as if they are isolated individuals are working matters out for themselves, using everyday analogies. Inquisitors regularly came across opinionated, self-taught individuals whose beliefs spanned the range from idiosyncratic through eccentric to insane, and who had reached those beliefs, as one Italian explained in 1275, 'from his own cogitations'. Some insights – that dead is dead, that bread is bread – simply thrust themselves onto the mind with or without a tradition behind them. Medieval Europeans could also think for themselves. The conundrum that our lives feel as if they mean something, while the world looks as if it means nothing, confronted them as it confronts all of us. Like all of us, they found their own solutions as best they could. And you don't need to know what you're talking about in order to have an opinion.

But by now we are dealing with a different mood. Mortalism was not usually fired by anger, but by anxiety, that meeting-point of fear and curiosity. What happens to us after we die is a subject worth being anxious about. In the late 1160s, King Amalric of Jerusalem fell ill. He summoned William, the archbishop of Tyre, to ask a question that William thought 'hardly admitted of discussion': 'whether ... there was any way of proving by reliable and authoritative evidence that there was a future resurrection?' The shocked archbishop quoted Christ's words, but Amalric asked 'whether this can be proved to one who doubts these things'. William claimed to have settled the



royal conscience with only a few words. Perhaps: but the episode suggests that doubt could surface literally anywhere in medieval Christendom, especially when a brush with illness or danger made fine words about immortality sound flimsy.

Anxieties of this kind – shallow-rooted, always springing up afresh – were a perennial feature of medieval Christendom. They were not a serious threat to it. Perhaps they were mere weeds, a tolerable and inescapable problem which could never be permanently eradicated but which could be easily controlled. Perhaps they were even a necessary part of the ecosystem, against which the true faith could learn its strength. There was no reason to suspect that these medieval doubters were the start of anything. A few weeds were not about to uproot the tree of faith. But when fresh doubts did begin to sprout, they did not do so in virgin soil in which no seed of unbelief had ever been sown.

So that is the story that the church courts tell. But I don't mean to write the scholars and intellectuals out of the story of medieval unbelief altogether. They were of course aware of it as a theoretical possibility, and scholastic theologians sometimes used atheists as straw men in their arguments for the existence of God. Historians have sometimes wondered if these imaginary atheists came to life, but I know of no evidence for this. Never mind fictional unbelievers, medieval theology had plenty of real ones to deal with: the philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, whom medieval Europeans venerated, but who, awkwardly, were mostly pagans or worse. Medieval theology's central scholarly project was to reconcile the Christian and Graeco-Roman intellectual legacies, and it has to be said that this project was hugely successful. But no sooner was the battle won in the thirteenth century than an unexpected new front opened up. The brash, turbulent new movement that sprung up in the city-states of northern Italy, which we call 'the Renaissance', was not a religious project: it was an attempt to revive the language and political culture of the ancients. But this gave it an unmistakably secular flavour which set it apart in the medieval world.

In 1417, the Florentine scholar and manuscript-hunter Gianfrancesco Poggio Bracciolini discovered the lost text of Lucretius' *Of the Nature of Things*. This epic poem from the first century BCE is still the best surviving summary of Epicurean philosophy, but that was not why fifteenth-century Italians copied and re-copied it so avidly. Simply, in an age hungry for the best Latin style, Lucretius was hard to beat. Renaissance scholars read Lucretius in the same way modern students of cinema watch *The Birth of a Nation* or *The Triumph of the Will*: for the technique, not the ideology. The result was that Epicureanism, which had been a boo-word for centuries, seeped into Europe's groundwater for real. Some of the refutations of Epicureanism that started to be written begin to seem less than wholehearted. In 1517 Florence's Medici rulers banned Lucretius from the city's schools, alarmed by the unhealthy interest he was generating. Nor was it only Lucretius. Cicero and Pliny the Elder, amongst others, were being very widely read and translated, including what we might think would be shockingly anti-religious sentiments.

But Renaissance readers do not seem to have been especially shocked. It was not, after all, news to them that most ancient writers were not Christians. When Lucretius, Cicero and Pliny lambasted pagan religion, Christians were happy to agree, simply regretting that those virtuous men had not had the opportunity to take the final step of faith in Christ. Nor were their sceptical ideas unheard-of. Mortalism was entirely familiar in medieval Europe. Likewise anti-providentialism: the argument that the world is governed simply by nature (as Pliny claimed) or by chance (Lucretius), so that God becomes an abstract curiosity, unable to answer prayers or work miracles. This is sometimes taken to have been the core idea of the Renaissance. But it was hardly new. The French builder accused in 1273 of saying that he would only trust God and the Virgin Mary if he received bankable guarantees from them, and of insisting that he owed his prosperity only to his own hard work, not to God, had not been reading Lucretius, but he might as well have been. Like mortalism, the notion that God does not hear prayers and either does not or cannot act is quite capable of suggesting itself to people without an intellectual tradition behind it. Anyone who had ever had a heartfelt or desperate prayer rebuffed could hardly avoid the thought. If all Europeans before the Renaissance had truly believed in divine providence, then the words that sprang instinctively to gamblers' lips would have been prayers, not blasphemies.

It does look, however, as if one particular medieval notion was given new force by the Renaissance. The Vatican Library contains a manuscript copy of Lucretius' poem made in 1497 by a young Florentine scholar named Niccolò



Machiavelli. Machiavelli's comments on the text pay little attention to literary, historical or even ethical matters, but concentrate intensely on Lucretius' materialism and especially to his doctrine of chance.

Not that Machiavelli was an Epicurean. In his mature career he showed no discernible interest in doctrine or metaphysics at all. His interests were strictly in politics and practical ethics. What made his treatment of religion so shocking was not a new idea, but a new way of applying a very old one.

The less notorious of Machiavelli's two books, the 1517 *Discourses on Livy*, includes a hefty section on religion and politics. This begins with the commonplace observation that governments ought to encourage religion in order to preserve social harmony. Most medieval Christians would of course agree. Lucretius, by contrast, resented the way politicians used religion to manipulate the people. Machiavelli agreed with Lucretius' analysis, with one crucial difference: he thought manipulation was a good thing. He praised an early Roman king for faking divine authority for his laws: how else would they ever have been accepted? Especially since 'the times were so impregnated with a religious spirit and the men with whom he had to deal so stupid' – two facts that evidently went together. Machiavelli recommended that governments encourage religion 'even though they be convinced that it is quite fallacious'. He added a breathtakingly cynical story about a Roman general preparing for battle who casts auguries to boost morale. Awkwardly, the auguries warn against an attack. So, with the chief priest's connivance, the general lies, telling his men that the results were favourable. When rumours of the true result nevertheless leak out, the general publicly blames the hapless priest for spreading subversion, and sends him to the front of the attack. And so when the priest is killed early in the battle, the general can describe it as divine vengeance for his lies, and proceed to win his victory. Of course, such things have been happening for as long as there have been soldiers and politicians. But no-one had ever earnestly described it as praiseworthy before.

By contrast, in Machiavelli's most infamous book, *The Prince*, religion is notable chiefly by its absence. In this utterly pragmatic and amoral worldview, popes and bishops are mere political players like any other. Machiavelli not only dismissed Christian ethics as nonsense for simpletons; he apparently despised Jesus Christ himself. He was not so foolhardy as to say so explicitly, and indeed, remarkably, never referred to Christ by name. But how else are we to read his praise of Moses, who as an 'armed prophet' had compelled obedience, and who was therefore vastly superior to the unnamed 'unarmed prophets ... who must use persuasion. ... They always come to grief, having achieved nothing'. His statement that 'a prince must have no other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war' is hardly an endorsement of the Prince of Peace.

So we can see how Machiavelli came by his sulfurous reputation. But was any of this actually dangerous? He was not openly trying to subvert Christianity. By his own theory, rulers ought to be trying to foster it, albeit cynically. Perhaps the contradiction lay in writing any of this down, rather than whispering it in a ruler's ear – but then, Machiavelli was a less successful politician in practice than in theory. The point remains: arguing that a political or intellectual elite should be above religion is not, in itself, a threat to religion. At most it creates another secularised space. Alongside the alehouse and the gaming-table we now have the council chamber. But as long as the theory requires the rest of the population to be trained in religious enthusiasm, that theory's impact will be self-limiting. Ruling elites who secretly disdain the ideology they formally proclaim tend not to endure very long, not least because they usually train their wives, children and servants in that ideology. So in the end they are replaced by true believers – or collapse into internecine quarrels first.

Unless their cynicism leaks out into the wider populace. Machiavelli wrote that Italy in his own time had 'lost all devotion and all religion' and had become 'irreligious and perverse'. Obviously by his theory this is a bad thing, but not wholly bad. For if the purpose of religion is to build a strong state, then – as Machiavelli saw it – Christianity is not a very good religion. Ideally it ought to be replaced with something less enervating, more muscular and (to be plain) more manly. In this Machiavelli belongs to a strand of anti-Christian thought stretching back to the Emperor Julian and forward to Edward Gibbon and to Nietzsche: a strand which despises Christianity for its otherworldliness, submissiveness, cherishing of weakness and tendency to pacifism.

This kind of anti-Christian thinking is important intellectually but not historically. Far from renouncing Christianity's distinctive ethic of mercy, modern Western atheism has redoubled it. Even Nietzsche was far more governed by Christian-style ethics than he liked to admit. The only serious attempt to put this strand of anti-



Christian thought into practice is twentieth-century fascism, which ended by pulling the house down on itself and everyone around it. Machiavelli's anti-Christian thinking was genuinely shocking, but – for that very reason – it was a dead end: a position that was prevented by its own inner logic from building any kind of mass following. So does it matter?

Perhaps only for this reason: he gave new voice to an old, corrosive thought. Some rumours claimed that Machiavelli was the true author of *Of the Three Impostors*, and it is almost true. *The Prince* is a real book, but it is also an imaginary one, indeed a much-imagined one: whispered about in fascinated horror more than it was read. The power of Machiavelli's writing even now is not that it tells us anything new, but that it tells us what we have always known, bluntly and without qualm or apology. The suspicion that religion was a political trick played by the powerful was perennial. But now that suspicion had a name. Machiavelli had said out loud what a great many others had long suspected: that it was all a giant trick. The time would come when making that idea legitimate would matter.

In the meantime, some of those who were enthralled by the Renaissance's ancient novelties acquired a reputation for unbelief, sometimes justified, often not. It is still unclear whether Étienne Dolet really did deny the immortality of the soul – the charge for which he was burned to death in Paris in 1546. But it is clear that his view of the question was almost wholly pagan. The true immortal, he wrote in 1538, is one to whom 'for all future time life after death has been gained by his reputation ... renowned either by military glory or by literary reputation'. This was the immortality he himself sought, adding,

'What indeed has death been able to accomplish as yet against Themistocles, Epaminondas, Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Caesar, Pompey, the Scipios, Demosthenes, Isocrates, Lysias, Homer, Pindar, Aristophanes, Cicero, Sallust, Plautus, Terence, Virgil, Ovid?'

This was the company Dolet longed for, not dreary Christian saints. He was so immersed in classicism that he had lost his moorings on his own century. People like him who were at the cutting edge of learning were simply not very interested in religion.

When the radical Italian theologian Lelio Sozzini wrote in 1549 that 'most of my friends are so well educated they can scarcely believe God exists', he was of course joking, but the joke depends on the stereotype of the learned unbeliever. North of the Alps, the association between the Italian Renaissance and atheism became proverbial. In England, 'Italian' became a euphemism for 'atheist'. By the early sixteenth century, the old unbelief of anger had acquired a new mood of cosmopolitan, satirical scorn. The rumoured covens of mocking atheists gathering in sixteenth-century cities, calling themselves 'the damned crew', are probably as imaginary as *Of the Three Impostors*, but like that phantom book, they matter. Believers began to hear knowing laughter at the back of their minds. Faith felt simple; doubt, sophisticated. It was Christendom's first serious flirtation with unbelief. But let's not get this out of proportion. That flirtation did not, in itself, significantly threaten Europe's long marriage to the old faith. Only if the marriage itself ran into trouble might it become dangerous. That's a story for next time. If the Renaissance itself offered a real threat to Christendom, it was of a subtler kind. Let me say by way of conclusion a little about what I mean.

Machiavelli's open fascination with Lucretius' scepticism was very unusual. Most Renaissance scholars treated Lucretius the way medieval theologians had treated Aristotle: by taking what they could use and leaving the rest. As the historian Ada Palmer has shown, almost all fifteenth-century commentators on Lucretius ignored his anti-religious passages and concentrated on his style and his ethics. Most Renaissance readers believed, or wanted to believe, that Epicureanism could be housetrained.

It almost worked. Epicurean or Stoic ethics could indeed look pleasingly compatible with Christianity. Renaissance scholars could learn from the ancients' exemplary lives as well as their exemplary Latin. Surely – so the argument went – Christians should be spurred to new heights of righteousness by the shameful thought that these mere pagans had outstripped them in virtue? It was an innocent rhetorical ploy, its double edge quite unintended. Christianity was, on this view, simply the consummation of all that was best about ancient philosophy. The greatest of the Renaissance's housetrainers, the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus, wrote a dialogue in which a character



claimed that ‘there are no people more Epicurean than godly Christians’: for Epicureans held that the purpose of life is the pursuit of happiness, and as everyone knows, true happiness is to be found in virtue. It was an over-tidy view of Epicureanism – Lucretius’ work has rather more sex in it than Erasmus’ – but also a singular view of Christianity. Erasmus united Renaissance philosophy with his homeland’s tradition of practical devotion to conclude that the heart of Christianity was its ethics. Christian doctrine conventionally focused on how sinners must and can be saved by God’s grace. Erasmus, who was suspicious of too much doctrine, wanted his readers to strive not to be sinners at all. Christians had traditionally thrown themselves on Jesus Christ’s mercy, as their Saviour. Now they were being urged to imitate him, as their exemplar.

So far, this was no more than a shift of emphasis. But the implications were unsettling. If Christianity was supremely about ethics, and if the ancient pagans were outstanding ethical exemplars, did that mean that unbelievers could achieve true godliness? Even if Christ is the finest pattern of virtue, could reason and the God-given natural law implanted in every human soul not bring us to the same destination? Should Christians therefore concentrate less on the devotional and sacramental life of the Church and more on cultivating virtues which pagans as well as Christians might share? Erasmus and his colleagues were in no sense trying to ask such alarming questions. They were trying to purify Christianity, not undermine it. That is what, in the centuries to come, would make their approach so dangerous.

© Professor Alec Ryrie, 2018