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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Ethics of Atheism

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Atheism and deism revalued. Heterodox religious identities in Britain, 1650–1800. Edited by Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci and Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth. Pp. xxv + 265. Farnham–Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. £70. 978 1 4094 5680 3

Anti-atheism in early modern England, 1580–1720. The atheist answered and his error confuted. By Kenneth Sheppard. (Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, 176.) Pp. vii + 339 incl. 13 black-and-white ills. Leiden: Brill, 2015. €138. 978 9 0042 6541 7

The soul of doubt. The religious roots of unbelief from Luther to Marx. By Dominic Erdozain. Pp. xv + 320. New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. £22.99. 978 0 19 984461 6

The history of a sect can scarcely avoid dancing with sectarianism. Even if the sect has vanished from the earth, it is difficult not to become either a defender or a critic, and when there are controversies still living, history cannot help but feed them and feed off them. The only certain way to avoid this is to retreat inside the sect entirely, becoming part of a world where it is the only and obvious subject of interest. And so the histories of religious minorities easily become self-referential ghettoes, where formidable expertise is built up while basic questions about how the subject is framed are left unasked.

So it has long been with the history of European atheism, scepticism and what was once called 'freethought'. Like sectarians looking back with grateful admiration at their persecuted forebears, or indeed like inquisitors constructing genealogies of heresy, some historians of atheism have produced heroic, teleological narratives akin to the old stirring certainties of the

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Scientific Revolution.[1] An important anchor to this narrative was a supposedly immovable weight of medieval faith, seen in Lucien Febvre's argument that atheism was literally inconceivable until the sixteenth century. The history of atheism, in this mode, became predominantly the history of the ideas of a relatively small number of canonical atheists, proto-atheists and fellow-travellers, from the sixteenth-century explorations of Sarpi, Bodin and Montaigne, through the seventeenth-century breakthrough led by Spinoza and Hobbes, to the full-blown eighteenth-century rationalism of Hume, Diderot and Voltaire. This thread is woven into several other historical fabrics, such as the argument that the Protestant Reformation is the fundamental cause of modern secularisation,[2] and indeed into the master-narrative of secularisation itself.

All sweeping historical narratives fray at the edges when the specialists start to gnaw at them. In this case, medieval Europe's age of faith now seems a good deal shakier.[3] Modernists' increasing unease with secularisation, too, may be more than simple restless contrarianism.[4] But it is easier to carp about the inadequacy of master narratives than actually to demolish them, let alone replace them. These three books exemplify three different ways of tackling the undoubted heart of the history of atheism: the early modern period, when the word itself was coined.

Hudson, Lucci and Wigelsworth's collection of essays is the most traditional in its approach: which is not a criticism. This is old-fashioned history of ideas, and most of the essays focus on canonical or semi-canonical thinkers such as Hobbes, John Toland, or Matthew Tindal. Highlights include Keith Yandell's bracingly-titled 'Was Hume an atheist?', which adheres to the law that any question in a title should always be answered 'No'. For Yandell concludes that the label sells Hume short. Atheism was, for Hume, a religious view, and Hume not only had no religious views: he held 'that there are no religious views not to have', that is, that neither theism nor atheism have any meaning at all. Or again, there is Charlotte Roberts's finely judged article on Edward Gibbon's religious identity, which concludes that the question of his atheism, or not, is *mal posée*. He found questions about his own or others' true, inner beliefs not merely 'intrusive and impolite' but also 'in some fundamental way meaningless': it was the expression of beliefs in

[1] Amongst the more scholarly of these see James Thrower, *Western atheism: a short history*, Amherst, NY 1999, and David Berman, *A history of atheism in Britain*, Abingdon 1990. For a more muted and sophisticated alternative see Gavin Hyman, *A short history of atheism*, London 2010.

[2] Brad S. Gregory, *The unintended reformation: how a religious revolution secularized society*, Cambridge, MA 201.

[3] John H. Arnold, *Belief and unbelief in medieval Europe*, London 2005; Steven Justice, 'Did the Middle Ages believe in their miracles?', *Representations* ciii (2008), 1–29.

[4] Jeffrey Cox, 'Master narratives of religious change', in Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, *The decline of Christendom in western Europe, 1750–2000*, Cambridge 2003, 201–17.

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behaviour which mattered, not least because, for him, it was actions which formed character rather than the reverse.

The book as a whole offers more than a collection of such case studies. The editors' stated agenda is of trying to historicise the subject, and to recognise that terms such as *atheism* are what they opaquely call 'shifting designators', that is, words whose meaning changes over time. The only thing wrong with this is that it is alarming that serious scholars should feel that they have to say it. More specifically, as their title indicates, their concern is to reinstate deism as a significant part of the story in its own right, rather than merely atheism's gateway drug. As Jonathan Israel's characteristically lively foreword points out, our own world has plenty of atheists, but deism has all but disappeared. The virtue of many of these essays is that they take its intellectual power and its subtle varieties seriously.

Collectively, two salient features of deism emerge from these essays. First, its earnest moralism, a theme to which we will be returning shortly. Gibbon was not the only sceptic to believe that a tree is known by its fruits. As Tomaso Cavallo's essay argues, the self-described 'Christian freethinker' Alberto Radicati based his defence of deism on its moral superiority, and held fast to the person of Jesus and the Epistle of James.

Second, and linked to this, was a preoccupation with miracles and with special providence, which, as Luisa Simonetti and Margaret Jacobs argue here, was a live political issue in an age when Stuart kings and pretenders laid claim to thaumaturgic powers. Some deists denied the possibility of miracles, but it was more common to deny their propriety. Like the gradualist geologists of the nineteenth century, the idea of an interventionist God offended their taste rather than their reason. The deist Thomas Chubb accepted that God might perform miracles under exceptional circumstances, but argued that a doctrine of special providence 'supposes the original constitution of things to have been so *badly* put together as that it had required the *constant* and *special* attendance of the Deity to new regulate it and amend it ever since' (p. 162). James Herrick's essay discusses the patristic scholar Thomas Woolston, who roundly attacked Christ's supposed miracles as not merely absurd but also dishonourable. The Gospels, Woolston believed, depicted 'a "magician" and a "sorcerer", whose miracles were "nauseating" displays … for which he would have been "made to swing" had he performed them in modern England' (p. 105). Deism was rooted at least as much in ethics and aesthetics as in metaphysics.

If this is a traditional way of tackling the subject, Kenneth Sheppard's monograph exemplifies another, emerging approach. This begins from the commonplace observation that atheism first entered European discourse as a term of abuse, and was being denounced long and loud well before anyone openly avowed it. In other words, if the early history of atheism is hidden from us, the early history of anti-atheism is numbingly well documented. So perhaps historians should do what we usually do, and go where the sources

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are. In this vein, we have already had, for example, an important 2011 article using William Perkins's anti-atheism to examine his fears for the fragility of his religious system, and a rich 2010 piece under the teasing title 'Atheism as a devotional category' which argued that atheism was a necessary shadow of post-Reformation belief, and that 'confessionalized Christians' belief in atheism proved as strong as their faith in God'.[5]

Sheppard's book, based on a doctoral thesis, does not have the same interpretative boldness, and suffers from some odd slips: even if there had been such a post as 'the bishop of Ireland', Jeremy Taylor would not have held it in 1653, nor was there a Queen Anne in 1692. The book's main task, which it performs very effectively, is to anatomise the principal anti-atheist arguments advanced by English polemicists across the long seventeenth century. As with Hudson, Lucci and Wigelsworth's volume, the focus on England risks being a little parochial, especially since many of these arguments were French or Dutch in origin. Yet Sheppard is always alive to the wider context, whether to remind us that the first great set-piece of anti-atheist polemic was Philippe du Plessis-Mornay's *De La Verité de la religion chrestienne* (1581), or indeed to track what we now call Pascal's Wager back to an Englishman, John Dove, in the 1590s. He does not explore whether, as seems likely, Dove got it directly or indirectly from Faustus Socinus.

The 'wager' was used in earnest as an anti-atheist argument, which is one sign of a wider pattern that Sheppard describes: that early anti-atheists threw everything they could at the debate, promiscuously mixing metaphysical, ethical, pragmatic and *ad hominem* arguments. The single most important early argument, he reckons, was the circular one of *consensus gentium*: atheism must be wrong because no-one, or almost no-one, is an atheist. Then came the queasily pragmatic argument that atheism was socially dangerous, mixed with sometimes over-indignant denials of the argument (attributed to Machiavelli) that religion was a mere trick by which the ambitious subdued the simple. Alongside this was an assertion of creation and of divine design, usually opposed to the 'Epicurean' claim that matter was eternal and self-sufficient.

Epicureanism, however, came to seem an increasingly formidable adversary. It was not only supposed atheists such as Hobbes who embraced it. Self-styled Christian Epicureans such as Pierre Gassendi and his English interpreters adopted some Epicurean ideas, notably atomism. The Cambridge Platonists, whom Sheppard sees as an anti-Epicurean, anti-atheist collective, were by the end of the seventeenth century being superseded by scientific Epicureans, who tried to engage with atomism while distancing themselves from Lucretius' anti-metaphysics; and by philosophers such as Locke, who, in moving away from virtue ethics and towards utilitarianism, were trying to

[5] Leif Dixon, 'William Perkins, "Atheisme", and the crises of England's Long Reformation', *Journal of British Studies* l (2011), 790–812; George Hoffmann, 'Atheism as a devotional category', *Republics of Letters* i/2 (2010), 44–55 at p. 55.

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reconcile Epicurean moral philosophy with Christianity. One advantage of this new approach was that it provided a powerful new set of arguments against both 'priestcraft' and 'enthusiasm', which to many English polemicists seemed to be evils as pernicious as atheism itself. The result, however, was that anti-atheist polemic subsided from its earlier shrillness to a more level-headed, probabilistic set of arguments which, for the first time, actually tried to engage in real debates with real opponents.

Sheppard is commendably and frustratingly cautious in drawing out the implications of his research for the wider story of western secularism. Alongside the Hudson collection, however, one of his more minor themes begins to look more prominent: the recurrent role of ethics. It is not simply that atheism was seen principally as a rejection of moral constraint, whether disapprovingly (this was Francis Bacon's definition, followed by many others), or with defiant verve (as by John Wilmot, earl of Rochester, notorious libertine and professed Hobbesian). The relentless polemical focus on atheists' immorality and especially their supposed tendency to die in despair – a theme that Sheppard usefully emphasises – is more than an appeal to social pragmatism or enlightened self-interest. It is an attempt to demonstrate that atheists' ideas must be false, since false doctrine cannot by its nature bear the fruit of a moral nature. The assumption that moral and intellectual failure are intertwined underpinned the Cambridge Platonist Henry More's anti-Epicurean argument: for him, since Christianity accorded with reason, atheism 'signified a moral and an intellectual failure attributed to a faulty, sinful character' (p. 142). His colleague John Smith argued that Epicurean atomism was disproved by the existence of virtue as an independent reality – and that that existence could only be experienced subjectively by virtuous persons reflecting on their own character. In other words, belief in atomism was an ethical, not an intellectual failing. When Smith's posthumous editor praised his exemplary moral character, he was not flattering a friend so much as providing a worked demonstration that atheism was false.

Ethical troubles of a different kind are at the heart of the most original and polemical of the books under review here, Dominic Erdozain's *The soul of doubt*. The core argument is disarmingly simple: much of what passes for early modern 'atheism' was not actually atheistic, and was certainly not driven by the philosophical concerns in which it frequently dressed itself. Erdozain, by training a historian of Victorian Britain, here traces a bold arc from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, whose central theme is what some Victorian scholars call 'protest atheism' (a term, incidentally, which Erdozain does not use, perhaps sensing unfriendly terrain in that direction). He leads us through a series of big-name thinkers, notably Castellio, Spinoza, Bayle (a key witness), Voltaire, Feuerbach and Darwin. In each case, the trenchant critiques that they made of the Churches of their day were, he argues, primarily moral rather than metaphysical or

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scientific: and, more to the point, the morality driving them was very specifically the morality of Jesus. These were not atheists, but freethinkers who valued what they believed to be true Christianity above the self-interested, hypocritical, ritualistic and intolerably cruel cant which the Churches tried to pass off as the one true faith. Their fundamental critique was that the Churches were not nearly Christian enough.

Erdozain's ambition cannot be faulted. He is trying to rewrite the history of secularisation and therefore of western modernity, describing the slow retreat of Christian orthodoxy not as 'an outer history of cooling conditions' but rather as an 'inner history of alienation' (p. 5), meaning specifically a 'collision between the merciful God and the God of orthodoxy' (p. 192) in which an increasing number of Christians disavowed the latter in the name of the former. It is a story which begins with Luther, in whom he sees a conflict between piercing moral insight and frankly oppressive theological systematisation. Thereafter, the story he tells is 'the story of Luther's conscience turning on Luther's Reformation' (p. 11), as a series of radicals found it impossible to reconcile their understanding of Christian ethics – in particular, of Jesus' ethics – either with dehumanising and ethically counter-intuitive theologies of total depravity or with the lived reality of ecclesiastical absolutism.

This is, in other words, openly polemical stuff, and Erdozain makes no attempt either to conceal where his own sympathies lie or to respect scholarly specialisms well beyond his own. He knows he will be counter-attacked, and simply pleads 'a historian's immunity': he has been 'conquered by the sources'. Specialists, especially those noting that he has (inevitably) relied chiefly on translations, will not be disarmed. They may, however, be seduced by the quality of his prose. It is rare to find an academic book which is such an active pleasure to read.

In most of his case studies, the underlying principle is the same. Scholars often downplay the Christian language which Spinoza, Voltaire, Bayle, Feuerbach and others routinely used, seeing it as a smokescreen. So, for example, Jonathan Israel baldly asserts of Bayle that 'the correct conclusion … is that he was far from being sceptical and was essentially atheistic' (*Atheism and deism revealed*, p. xviii), despite his lifelong denials. Some early modern sceptics unquestionably used this ploy (the Hudson collection has several examples), and Erdozain admits that some undoubted atheists, such as the Baron d'Holbach, continued to use religious concepts but were simply 'trading in enemy currency' (p. 132). In general, however, his instinct is to take his sources' professions of belief seriously.

This has some striking results. Bayle's deep engagement with Christianity is one thing. A Christian Spinoza might seem harder to swallow, but Erdozain makes a powerful case that he was something like a convert from Judaism to the radical Arminian-spiritualist Christianity of the Dutch Collegiants, influenced by Quaker anti-transcendance: a conversion that would never have been consummated with anything so crassly clerical

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as a baptism. Erdozain's Spinoza was consistently drawn to the person of Jesus, whom he saw as 'effortlessly embodying the wisdom to which others could only aspire' (p. 108), and of whom he said that 'the voice of Christ may be called the voice of God' (p. 112). His denial of miracles, and especially of Christ's Resurrection, was a matter of theological principle: miracles, which declare the truth prophetically, are as inferior to true, rational religion as churchy dogma is to spiritual truth, or, indeed, as the Old Testament to the New. In this way, his denial of Christ's divinity needs to be seen as a confession of faith. 'Like many of the Christian spiritualists, Spinoza acknowledged a mystical Christ whose supreme gifts were not to be confused with the orthodox doctrine of incarnation' (p. 114).

The same trick is performed repeatedly through the book. Feuerbach is driven, not by scepticism, but by righteous anger at 'religion', which for him is 'a money-laundering scheme in which our worst instincts are passed through a series of heavenly transactions before being claimed back as virtue' (p. 228): a critique which Luther would have understood. Voltaire's 'radioactive' anticlerical writings (p. 134) are fired by his anger at superstition which makes a mockery of God, and his disdain for miracles is based on his view that 'the universal theologian, that is, the true philosopher, sees that it is contradictory for nature to act on particular or single views'. As Erdozain says: 'That was not naturalism. It was theology' (p. 155). Voltaire's tendency in his later works to claim that God had given Jesus 'more light … than any other' (p. 163) was true to his core message, not the backsliding into convention some of his admirers have regretted. The cheekiest snatch from atheist territory, however, is T. H. Huxley, Darwin's bulldog, whose opposition to Bishop Wilberforce was driven by his loathing for 'effete and idolatrous sacerdotalism'. Huxley's famous insistence on agnosticism rather than atheism here becomes, not a demonstration of *scientific* epistemology, but an argument that any attempt to police orthodoxy is *ethically* repugnant. In the face of episcopal hauteur, he appealed to 'the supremacy of private judgement … which is the foundation of the Protestant Reformation' and to the Bible, 'the most democratic book in the world' (pp. 186–7).

As more and more improbably Christian rabbits are pulled from Erdozain's atheistical hat, it is a positive relief to discover that some canonical thinkers are beyond his scope. All he can do with Hobbes is to note that some Quakers respected him. Kant's deism 'built a fortress of conscience … that swore a rescued God to silence', and demonstrated that 'a religious impulse – the Protestant conscience – can create an outlook that is no longer expectantly religious' (p. 120). Hume and Diderot are still atheists. Marx, who features in the title, is not being claimed as a Christian, simply as the Voltaire to Feuerbach's Bayle, whose secular system was underpinned by a distinctively Christian – or post-Christian? – righteous anger.

Occasionally the argument feels in danger of swallowing itself. At times, Erdozain seems simply to be proving that Christianity's troubles in the long

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Enlightenment arose partly from its own internal tensions, or indeed that Christianity's critics came from a Christian milieu, neither of which are very surprising. At other moments, he seems to imply that atheism does not exist at all, but is simply a rarefied and perhaps purified form of Protestantism. In fact, he picks a more insightful path between the banal and the preposterous. Secularisation is real, but it is fundamentally an ethical revolt, driven by the core principles of the specific religion that it is trying to demolish.

To accept this would be to reframe the way in which we understand modernity. Secularisation would appear a much more specifically Christian process. (Indeed, ironically, its very claim to universality would arise from that specificity.) It would therefore be unlikely to be very closely echoed precisely in other cultural settings. In that Christian or post-Christian context, secularisation might seem more inevitable, rather than less: Christianity has apparently been eating itself, rather than being devoured by materialism. Or – and this is where Erdozain would apparently like to go – this is a process by which some ghastly, tyrannical errors that had crept into Christianity have been purged, perhaps ending in a truer, healthier Christianity than ever before. Although, as with Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity', it is easier to praise this than to imagine what it might look like in practice.

Erdozain does not follow his story through into the twentieth century, no doubt feeling he has bitten off quite enough. My hunch, however, is that he has missed a final chapter in this story of Christianity's battle with its own ethics: the Second World War. A great many German Protestants (and rather fewer Catholics) supported Nazism, seeing it as both as a bulwark against Communism and as an expression of traditional Christendom's structures and values. Yet since 1945 Nazism has become something which the western world has not had since the end of witch-hunting: an all-but universally acknowledged reference point for absolute evil. The story of the Churches' painful slowness to recognise that evil, as they prioritised their doctrinal agendas over human suffering, is very much Erdozain's story. In this instance, however, the lesson was finally taken to heart. Whether because they had been slowly learning from their Enlightenment critics, or because Nazism's horrors were so extreme as to be able to rouse even the most morally torpid Church, western Christians and post-Christians alike have been compelled to orientate themselves to a new and frankly secular moral landscape, in which murder and hatred are worse evils than blasphemy and idolatry. This is a part of what Barth and Bonhoeffer meant when they attacked *religion*, an attack which ought to earn them a place in Erdozain's pantheon.

As to the results of this moral reorientation, it is too soon to say. Quite possibly, many European and North American Christians will gradually revert to type, as the shock fades from memory. Others will continue trying to assimilate it, a process which, so far, has been as damaging to Churches' institutional health as it has been salutary for their ethical

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character. Whether the patient can survive the success of this operation remains to be seen. If you agree with Erdozain, however, this may be the arena where the battles of 'secularisation' (if we can still use that word) are likely to be fought out. If you do not, you will still do well to find a more provocative and thoughtful recent book on how western, secular modernity came to be the way it is.

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The Eusebius Essay Prize The World Christianities Essay Prize

The *Journal* now offers two annual essay prizes of £500 apiece. The *Eusebius Essay Prize* is awarded to the best essay submitted on a subject connected with any aspect of early Christian history, broadly understood as including the first seven centuries AD/CE. Scholars of any relevant discipline (theology, classics, late antique studies, Middle Eastern Studies etc.) are encouraged to enter the competition. The new *World Christianities Essay Prize*, now offered for the first time, will be awarded to the best essay submitted on any aspect of the history of Christianity beyond Europe and North America since the year 700, and is likewise open to scholars of any relevant discipline. Both competitions are open to scholars regardless of seniority, although submissions from junior scholars are particularly welcomed. Submissions for either prize should not exceed 8,000 words, including footnotes. Submissions should be made by 30 September 2017 (for the *Eusebius* prize) or 31 March 2018 (for the *World Christianities* prize): the winning essays will be published in the *Journal*, probably in the numbers appearing in July 2018 (*Eusebius*) and January 2019 (*World Christianities*). Other submissions entered into the competition may also be recommended for publication. The editors reserve the right not to award either prize if no essay of sufficient quality is submitted. All essays should be sent by email attachment (with the name of the relevant prize in the subject line), prepared to *Journal* style, to Mrs Mandy Barker at jeh@robinson.cam.ac.uk

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