

ALAN CHARLES KORS

Atheism in France, 1650-1729

*Volume I The Orthodox Sources
of Disbelief*



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VOLUME I: THE ORTHODOX SOURCES OF DISBELIEF

Alan Charles Kors

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To the memory of my beloved mother

Belle Kors (1909–1978)

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PREFACE

THIS STUDY is the first of two volumes that, taken together, will seek to explain the emergence of atheism from the intellectual communities of early-modern France. Each study, however, is intended to stand alone, focused on issues of independent historical importance. This work is a study of the significance of "atheism" to the orthodox learned world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It is at once an analysis of the problem of atheism in early-modern French thought and, from that perspective, a portrait of a learned culture that would change the conceptual possibilities of France and, in many ways, the West. The second volume will explore the actual atheism that arose in the early eighteenth century, and its specific relationships to the crises of both orthodox and heterodox learned worlds.

The chronological boundaries of this study are less arbitrary than might appear from its curious dates, extending from the death of Descartes at one end to the death and posthumously discovered atheistic manuscript of the abbé Meslier at the other. It seeks to understand how, in the time between, the seemingly boundless theistic confidence of a culture, its ostensible sense of the utter unthinkability of atheism, was unraveled by its own hands, that is, by its own teachings, debates, tensions, and rivalries. It was a learned culture that claimed, again and again, that the existence of God was so evident and manifest that only a depraved and insincere libertine could even seek to disbelieve in it. Only depravity seeking assurance of impunity, it taught, could doubt that there was an independent and intelligent Supreme Being above and yet concerned with the world. It offered a great diversity of grounds, reasons, and formal demonstrations for belief in the existence of God, certain that these compelled belief. It also generated its own antithesis to that theistic conviction, and, temporarily, at least, it destroyed its own assurance in the *évidence*, both logical and empirical, of that belief. To understand the atheism and materialistic naturalism that arose from the early-modern learned world of France, one must understand the culture and crisis from which such conceptions emerged.

This book is *not* about the theoretical logic or implications of ideas (what minds somehow "ought" to have concluded from thoughts they had). It is *not* yet another analysis of the history of early-modern texts that later centuries declared "canonical" (and somehow a priori "influential" because of modern liking for them). It is *not* an attempt to establish a metadialogue between the seventeenth century and the past, or, for

that matter, between the seventeenth century and the present. In fact, there is provocative and enlightening intellectual history done from all of these perspectives, but none of them is my choice for this work. Rather, this book is a study of the actual intellectual behavior, in context, of the French-speaking learned world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In the early decades of the eighteenth century, there emerged from the thought of that profoundly theistic community an unambiguously and explicitly atheistic current of speculation and judgment. I seek to understand how it was possible for that particular community to generate that particular current of thought.

Quantitatively, of course, atheism was a narrowly circumscribed current of thought. For every atheistic manuscript or treatise, there were thousands of theological, devotional, liturgical, and catechetical publications. Indeed, for every work about atheism, there were thousands and thousands of works on other burning issues in theology and ecclesiology: heresy, Jansenism, mysticism, quietism, grace, the Eucharist, deism, physical premotion, pantheism, Richerism, Gallicanism, ultramontaniam, monasticism, propagation of the faith—and so on, and so on. Yet qualitatively, the debate over atheism was different from all of these, since virtually all religious works and all theological and ecclesiological debates would be rendered moot (and almost every substantive position taken within them would be nullified) if the atheists were right. As a subject of historical interest, the emergence of atheism should more than hold its own with the topics of current historical concern.

It is, however, a subject that touches by its nature a large number of deep and passionate concerns. Let me emphasize, then, indeed, let me promise, that it is only as a historian that I address any of these. It is not my intent, in any manner whatsoever, to do more here than disclose aspects of the actual human past. My concerns are neither philosophical, nor theological, nor antitheological in this work. I write as a historian.

Even in this regard, however, I am only too painfully aware of how many areas of scholarly specialization in intellectual, religious, and institutional history this book intersects, and, thus, of the countless monographs and studies that should inform it. One common meaning of *infinite* in the seventeenth century was simply “indefinite,” the state of being, in practice, boundless, of having no limits that could be reached. In that sense, the literature I cross here—the history of belief and disbelief; the reception of the classics; the history of philosophy and philosophical theology; the evolution of learning; the effect of travel and discovery; the rivalries of monastic and other religious orders, to name but a few—is “infinite.” There are surely, thus, countless works, secondary and primary, whose absence from my notes will be striking to diverse specialists. This is true both for general and particular issues, and doubly so for in-

dividual schools of thought, institutions, authors, and texts. Any offense given by this, either to the living or to the dead, is unintentional. I have worked on this study, with two years away for yet more important things, since 1975. For a frightening number of years, as I followed the readings of my learned community from one citation to another, the bibliography of works read grew arithmetically while the bibliography of works to be read grew exponentially. What prodigious readers and name-droppers the authors of early-modern France could be! How little I had known when filling out the “feasibility” portions of those grant proposals of what was still my youth!

I wanted to read everything, but when there were choices to be made, I always chose to read primary sources with my own mind’s eyes rather than profit from the labors of others. (I hope that *you*, however, will not abandon me in similar pursuit!) The benefit of such a choice is that I believe myself to know what that learned world actually read and what it did not, what is representative and what is not, what is original and what is commonplace. Secondary works that influenced my choice of objects of study or that influenced, by my agreement or disagreement, my sense of people, places, issues, and ideas are listed in the bibliography that concludes volume II of this work. I trust that critics will let me know, in print, by letter, or in person, what I have missed that would have shed brighter or different light on the problems I have explored.

There surely are countless ways to analyze and explicate the emergence of atheism in early-modern France. I do not seek to argue with historians, however, on issues of theories of analysis and explication. From the premise that intellectual history, like all forms of history, is human curiosity critically examining the empirical record of the past, I have tried to know the French learned world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as deeply and as broadly as I could, so that I could understand its inheritance, its education, its debates, its tensions, its procedures, its dilemmas, and its options. I have taken, so to speak, the courses its members both followed and gave, read the works it wrote or kept alive, overheard its arguments, studied its approbations and censures, examined the manuscripts it could not or would not dare to publish, opened its mail, and, in short, tried as much as I could to live questioningly among its minds for an extended period of time. One person’s familiarity, of course, may well be another’s superficial and misleading acquaintance, and immersion, alas, is not the same as enlightenment. My hope, however, is, at the least, that a learned community which altered the world will become at once more alive and more accurately analyzed for my readers than if I had not undertaken this endeavor, and, at the most, that the emergence of atheism from that community will come to make far more sense than

before. I beg the reader to judge me in terms of those at once modest and ambitious hopes.

. . .

The learned community of early-modern France is at once remarkably familiar and remarkably foreign, since we of the modern learned world both are its offspring and have traveled to physical and mental worlds it could not have foreseen. It too had its innovators and its traditionalists, often unable to see how much in fact they shared; its university professors, like ours, kept one eye on eternal questions and the other on reputations and careers, and usually managed, as we do, to secure a peer review by colleagues sympathetic to their fundamental intellectual orientations and goals; it even worried, as we do, that the latest theories out of Paris were vitiating the integrity of the intellectual world. It was, in a European sense at least, a community that defined itself internationally, although, given Latin, its lingua franca, it had far less need of translators than we. It created, more often than not, the criteria of scholarship in the humanities and, indeed, of scholarly debate, on which we still fundamentally rely, gradually substituting critical method for tradition and intuition, although our variations on the trees often obscure the forest we share with them. To read its journals of scientific, philosophical, literary, and classical studies is to see the origins of those in which scholars still pursue or praise each other in terms that many of its scholars well would have understood. While most of the Western world has let its medieval and early-modern titles and professional pretensions go the way of sumptuary laws, the educated, especially the doctors of philosophy, divinity, law, and medicine whom universities then and now have sent forth into the world, still call themselves *docte*, that is, “learned,” and somehow succeed even in these egalitarian times to get contemporaries to call them by august terms. Once a year, *our* doctors of philosophy even sport *its* bonnets and robes. On the other hand, our forebears in basic and esoteric *scientia* functioned in a world that their progeny would transform both physically and mentally in revolutionary ways. We certainly can see ourselves in the mirror of their curiosity, their methods, and their vanities, but the backdrop is different, indeed.

Like most learned communities in the history of the West since its time, and like many that preceded it, that of early-modern France wanted to know a great deal about the world in which it found itself. It was itself the heir, however, of two great traditions of knowledge, the classical and the Judeo-Christian, and it tried ceaselessly to come to terms with the tensions and paradoxes of that division in both its science and its wisdom. A Christian learned world, it in theory could have turned its back on pre-

Christian and non-Christian gentile thought, but it recognized too much of itself in those minds, and it knew in myriad ways that thought could not be indifferent to the history of thought. It would have found manifestly self-contradictory a modern world of thought that often treats as marginal or epiphenomenal (in academic texts, for learned audiences and for scholarly review, no less) the human effort to know and understand. Long before our arrival into the institutions in which it also transacted its mental affairs (universities, academies, publishing, and journals), the learned world of early-modern France grappled with the fundamental question of whether the universe in which humanity found itself was eternal or created, random or designed, explicable or inexplicable by natural knowledge alone, amoral or just, teleological or purposeless. In brief, it grappled with the problem of atheism. My undertaking is a study of the dynamics and consequences of that engagement. It is, thus, a study of early-modern France, of the learned community, and of the emergence of atheism. It is also a recognition from one learned world of the enduring significance of the mental life of another.

. . .

The reader should know a few things at the outset about my practices in this text. First, past words and thoughts are the data of intellectual history, and data must be shared. I believe it essential in such history to hear tone and nuance, to become familiar with the sound, so to speak, of one's subjects' voices. The numerous quotations in this book are the "charts and tables" of my particular craft; they are there to persuade you of a certain historical view of things. Second, and related, it is not enough in this study to discern what might strike one anachronistically as the "significant" texts of a culture. Since I am arguing a case often based on claims about influence and the "climate" of opinion, it is essential, not a luxury, that I demonstrate the breadth and representative character of certain phenomena. Third, a mere glance at certain intellectual phenomena is unworthy of your attention. Having identified specific tendencies as broad and general, I shall often take a longer, fuller, and more analytic look at individual instances of these.

There is an overarching argument to this book: the generation of disbelief by orthodox culture itself. What makes an argument valuable in history, however, is not its elegance or complexity, but its relationship to the data to which it is inductively bound. In sharing the data from which I believe my argument derived, I hope also to help you draw a richer portrait of that absorbing learned world. My pattern thus, in most chapters, will be to offer a characterization or account of a phenomenon essential to my argument; to establish such a phenomenon as broad, general, and

possessing an interested audience; to examine it in specific embodiments that give you a fuller understanding of its nature; and to link it to the next claim of my thesis.

The footnotes, in addition to serving the usual function, are also a part of the effort at portraiture, and in that spirit, even the reader prepared to take me on faith is invited to use them extensively: early-modern title pages are a singular window onto their mental world. All early-modern titles are given in their early-modern spelling (and capitalization), in which there is great charm. Titles superfluously long, however, which early-modern titles can be, have been shortened, with the hiatuses noted.

. . .

In general, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors did *not* emphasize text by italicization or underlining, which often served merely to indicate direct quotation in their works. I, on the other hand, want to ensure that certain aspects of a quotation do not pass by without your having noticed them with particular attention. *All emphases, unless otherwise indicated, are therefore my own.*

All foreign-language quotations are given here in English, since surely one of the functions of an American historian of France is to make a foreign culture accessible to compatriots. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. Where I believe the French or Latin to be ambiguous, however, or where I think the reader plausibly might find a different meaning, I have provided the original, without modernizing the spelling. The footnotes should allow the reader in all cases to consult the original language on his or her own. I know Europeans who take American historians to task for their presentation of French-language data, including quotations, in English. At the same time, however, these persons often justifiably criticize seemingly well-educated Americans for their ignorance of the cultures and histories of the world's diverse peoples. Surely, the two criticisms cannot be made simultaneously in good faith, and the individual American cannot be asked to learn ten languages. American historians of foreign cultures should not be blind to the needs of their own.

Problematic attributions of authorship abound in early-modern France. Since my arguments all turn on the generality of phenomena, specific attributions are rarely critical, and I have accepted the standard attributions of the Bibliothèque Nationale or other major libraries. Where there are variations in the spelling of names, I have sought to utilize those most commonly employed. In my next study, focused on heterodox thought itself, where issues of attribution relate substantively to my argument, all such problems will be both specified and addressed.

In almost all instances, I have consulted early-modern editions of ancient, medieval, and early-modern texts, both for the sensual and intellectual pleasure of holding in my hands what early-modern readers themselves held, and to be certain that it was their versions of texts that would inform my work. The exceptions generally are only later critical editions of their works or standard editions based on their own early-modern texts. It is not always easy, however, to do European history from these shores, for the need and the ability to consult abroad do not always coincide, and the reader will note a few editions of works later than those held by early-modern hands. These are minor exceptions to my rule, however, and I do not think any of them critical. Wherever possible and unproblematic, especially in the case of ancient and medieval texts, I have tried to provide you with accessible alternatives for your own consultation. Where I think the specialist might want more information or data than I have provided in the main body of my text, I have added such to the footnotes. Enough self-justification, however!

. . .

Research for this book benefited at critical junctures from the aid of others. I am deeply grateful to the American Council of Learned Societies (1975–1976) and the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University (1986–1987) for their support. At the roulette tables of funding, fortune often smiles more favorably upon those setting out on some adventure than on those near the end of one. I am doubly indebted, therefore, to the Davis Center for its willingness to assist in the completion of this study. The generosity of Shelby Cullom Davis, Jr. and the capacious wisdom and dedication of Lawrence Stone as director of the Davis Center have contributed in exemplary fashion to academic research and dialogue. The Davis Center was a genuine oasis of collegiality, of intellectual diversity and tolerance, and of ongoing academic stimulation. I am indebted to Alfred J. Rieber, who, when Chair of the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania, did so much to gain for me the time to bring this project to completion. I also am indebted to Vartan Gregorian, who, when Dean of Arts and Sciences and then Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, which he served full well, was so supportive of my work.

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Atheism in France, 1650–1729

Introduction

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF ATHEISM

THE EMERGENCE OF ATHEISM from the French learned world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is a dramatic moment of human culture, and it is tempting to seek to explain it by means of long-term phenomena. My own penchant, however, is for understanding human affairs in terms of the actual specific contexts in which they occur. Immersion in the data and details of contextual phenomena creates, of course, a vested interest in the significance of the particular. It also allows, however, a sense of a unique time and place in which, quite wonderfully, the “short-term” assumes phases and dynamics of its own and becomes, as befits any moment of human history, inordinately complex. As one studies the learned world of early-modern France from this vantage, longer-term phenomena become interesting only by virtue of their embodiment in more immediate dynamics of this singular period of French history.

To one familiar with the intricacies of the short-term, the broadest categories of the long-term, such as “secularization” or “desacralization,” may begin to sound, at worst, vague beyond utility, or, at best, like complex abstractions whose particular sources are not yet understood. Nonetheless, for those who think more boldly, I should hope that if this work has been done well, it will link in some way with their broadest concerns, confirming, perhaps, someone’s general views in the particular, or, at the least, making someone’s agencies more clear as they acted in one time and place. Nonetheless, it is upon the French early-modern learned world, its ways of thinking and acting, and what emerged from these, that I shall lavish what time I have here.

There is a sense, however, in which this work certainly does reflect, and, indeed, arose from, a concern with the modestly longer-term. If the sequence of research determined the sequence of narrative, I should begin here with the late eighteenth century, with the atheism of d’Holbach, Nageon, and Diderot, and work back to the clandestine atheistic manuscripts of the early eighteenth century, and, from there, to the debates and dilemmas of the generation that began (since I must stop somewhere) in the year of Descartes’s death. That is, in fact, how I have studied the phenomenon of French disbelief. Tracing the sources of late Enlightenment atheism to, among other things, the atheistic manuscripts of the early eighteenth century, I sought, in turn, the roots of the disbelief and philo-

sophical motifs of the first “modern” atheists in France. That inquiry led not to a prior history of free thought, most of which culminated in deeply theistic deisms or in antiphilosophical skepticisms, but to the orthodox culture of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in France. It was, above all, within the deeply Christian learned culture of those years that there occurred inquiries and debates that generated the components of atheistic thought. It was, to say the least, not what I had expected; it indeed was what I found. I begin, then, with this volume, to retrace my steps in reverse. The thrill (and often tedium) of the detective’s trail was in the research; to you I now offer the first part of the dossier thus compiled. Before one can understand the heterodoxy of early-modern atheism, one first must understand the orthodox sources of disbelief. That is the goal of this volume.

. . .

This book is not an argument with other historians. Although I shall begin with what a few historians have had to say, and shall use one or two to make a point now and then, I am, in matters academic, far more tempted by the eremitic than the mutually referential, that is, the historiographical, and, indeed, regret the combative tone I have taken at other times with historians with whom I have disagreed. There are truly countless valuable ways to try to know something about human life before our own appearance in this world, and we should all be fools to close our minds’ ears to each other’s honest accounts of long study and familiarity with parts of it.

The general kind of history I do—with its often misleading modifier, *intellectual*—goes in and out of favor and through various metamorphoses with startling rapidity. It is, in the final analysis, curiosity applied to the history of human conceptual behavior. Whatever the weight diverse schools of *thought* give to that behavior as cause or effect, it seems one of the things that most sets us apart from all other species, and, indeed, that gives us a history which is more than a “biology” (although, of course, the whole concept of “biology” arises from conceptual behavior and itself has an intellectual history). The point seems obvious, but it may be one of those forests ignored in favor of particular trees.

. . .

In 1729, a rural priest named Jean Meslier died, leaving behind him, to the scandal of those who knew of it, a “Testament” of explicit and combative atheism. Although, as we shall see, the great teachers and learned figures of his culture taught that the existence of God was a truth so luminous that only a depraved or ignorant “fool” could disbelieve it, Meslier was not persuaded by their claims. Significantly, he did not believe

himself in any way obliged, in order to disagree with them, to abandon the habits of “reason,” “evidence,” or “demonstration” that those teachers also sought to inculcate. To the contrary, one knows from the content of his manuscript, and even from his marginalia to the great Fénelon’s published “demonstrations” of the existence of God, that he was committed to rational and evidential grounds for his disbelief.¹ This work will seek to explain how it became conceptually possible for someone like Meslier to disbelieve the most essential proposition of his culture’s view of the world, that “God exists.” It is not in any way focused on Meslier himself, to whom I shall return at great length in my next volume, but, at times, it will use him as a foil. Our central question here is this: from what phenomena and sources in their learned culture did the authors of the atheistic manuscripts of the early eighteenth century derive their grounds for rejecting the claim that the existence of God was indubitable? The alternative views of the world that followed such a rejection, and the (often equally surprising) identification of the sources and debates from which those were derived, will constitute our next “dossier.”

. . .

Meslier’s rejection of belief in God raises two questions (among others): one, about Meslier, and his life; the other, about the intellectual sources of his disbelief. Most historians, I suspect, would find the former the more “empirical” of the questions, and the latter the more “speculative.” For myself, I would reverse those descriptions. The more *speculative* question, it seems to me, is why Meslier was so disaffected from the culture that engendered him. Who has a satisfactory theory of such motivation? The usual attempts at explanation focus on phenomena that, if “causes” of alienation, should have produced tens of thousands of Mesliers, where, in fact, there were few indeed. The more “empirical” question, I should think, is that of what sources, conceptions, and intellectual contexts and dynamics made possible the actual *content* of his beliefs.

Accounts of the social, political, or economic roots of Meslier’s disaffection *might* tell us why he detached himself from the mental world of his Church, but they simply cannot explicate the particular substance of his disaffection. Why did he not become a Huguenot, a Lutheran, a sorcerer, a deist, a libertine, a skeptic, a Socinian, or, for that matter, *if merely being preserved as a notion sufficed to make some particular heterodoxy a real option*, a Manichaeon? The tendency of Meslier’s mind to think in particular, specific ways is simply unexplained by any amount of

¹ Meslier’s “Testament” and his notes on Fénelon can be found in the invaluable critical edition by Jean Deprun, Roland Desné and Albert Soboul, eds., *Oeuvres complètes de Jean Meslier*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1970–1972).

social, political, or economic analysis. In fact, the culture in which he participated made it possible for Meslier to achieve a restructuring of his view of reality that involved the most radical break then imaginable from his Church: he became an atheist. That was his specific form of belief and disbelief. How was such an option available to Meslier? With what ideas could someone think atheistically by then? With what replies and objections could someone reject what the culture had taken to be unshakable proofs of the existence of God? Why was atheism a real option for the authors of France as the eighteenth century dawned? In the face of claims of universal consent, of Aristotelian or Scholastic a posteriori proofs of God, of Cartesian or Malebranchist a priori proofs of God, how was it now possible, conceptually, to declare and believe the world to be without compelling proof of God, without plan, without providence, without immaterial prime mover, without necessary perfect being? What mental events now made atheism an actual alternative for a mind of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries? In short, can one account in those terms for the atheism that emerged from the learned world in France, leaving to others the psychohistory, social history, or metahistory of why atheists chose or were impelled to think in such ways?

This distinction between explaining motivation and explaining the specific content of human conceptions is too easily overlooked. Explanations of why, in noncognitive terms, someone revolts against or simply rejects the fundamental beliefs or values of his or her culture may shed light on rebellion or alienation or creativity, whatever the case may be, but they cannot possibly specify why this or that *particular* content and form are the *particular* conceptual expression of such rebellion, alienation, or creative act, or even why such content and form are available to such a person at such a time. Consider, by analogy, the problem of accounting for specific notions of the just society. A rise in prices or taxes, a sense of traditional expectations altered, or any number of phenomena might well explain the impulse to revolt, but without attention to the history of cognition and conceptualization, the history of how issues were defined and debated and transformed, one will never know why revolt has spoken in a myriad of specific conceptions. As the Benedictine educator Porcheron wrote in 1690, the mind can be compared to "a naked guest who comes to live in a furnished palace."² Let us explore some of that furniture together.

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Two major and provocative historical works, one old, one new, have discussed the problem of "atheism" in *sixteenth-century* France, which is

² David-Placide Porcheron, O.S.B., *Maximes pour l'éducation d'un jeune seigneur* . . . (Paris, 1690).

not without interest for a study that wishes to analyze the sources of disbelief in the France of the second half of the seventeenth century. Lucien Febvre and François Berriot both sought to make sense of the use of the term *atheist* in sixteenth-century theology, moral commentary, and polemic, and to infer plausible conclusions about the persons and groups so described.³ Febvre saw clearly how imprecisely and polemically the term was used in the sixteenth century, but he perhaps assumed too hastily that this settled the cognitive matter, and that any “speculative” atheism was literally unthinkable in a society so permeated by the structures, symbols, and experiences of religious life and understanding. One may think about “unthinkability” differently, as we shall see.

Berriot understood full well the connection drawn by the early-modern orthodox mind between rejection of traditional values and denial of the God assumed to be the author of those values, but he supposed, perhaps arbitrarily, that some of the alienated and marginal figures denounced by clerical observers indeed may have rejected that God in some cognitive sense and may have been correctly identified as “atheists” in terms that link them to later phenomena. Let us look at Febvre and Berriot in the thickets of sixteenth-century polemic.

. . .

For Lucien Febvre, it was evident enough that the sixteenth century hurled about the charge of atheism with great abandon, even when it specified that those accused in some sense had evidenced a disbelief in God. “To say that atheism is the act of denying the deity,” he noted, “is not to say anything very precise.” The accusation of atheism, he concluded, could mean many things, none of which was what one would mean by the term today. Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, and Erasmus, among other reformers or critics of sixteenth-century creed or practice, all were termed atheists by diverse adversaries. Indeed, for Febvre, the charge was generally just a rhetorical device to express the strongest disapproval, or simply “a kind of obscenity meant to cause a shudder in an audience of the faithful.” Saint Paul, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, had termed the pagans who knew neither Christ nor the Jewish covenant “without God in the world,” and in that sense, *atheist* continued to be an epithet applied to anyone who “did not think about [religious] things exactly the way everyone else did.” The Church had built bridges between Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy, Febvre also argued, but felt forever

³ Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. B. Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass., 1982). The English translation is preferable to the French editions, being more precise in its citations and translations from the Latin than the original and revised French editions of Paris, 1942, and Paris, 1947; François Berriot, *Athéismes et athéistes au XVI^e siècle en France*, 2 vols. (Lille, [1977]).

threatened by what it took to be the heterodox Aristotelianism of Averroes. Those whom it perceived to be followers of the suspect commentator, such as Pomponazzi, also could be identified as atheistic.⁴ As a description of almost all the particular accusations he examines, Febvre's account seems just right.

Being Lucien Febvre, however, and interested in a deeper history of the French mentality, he went much further. A central part of Febvre's agenda in this work was not merely the contextual analysis of actual accusations, but the larger argument that atheism was, in some fundamental sense, "unthinkable" before the philosophical revolution of the seventeenth century. Atheism required philosophical "free flights" of thought, Febvre argued, and the sixteenth century could only speculate in Latin, "a language made to express the intellectual processes of a civilization that had been dead for a thousand years." Radical new modes of speculation might reach "the threshold of philosophical consciousness," but not until the Cartesian revolution in philosophical language could a fundamental departure from past ways of thought emerge.⁵ In addition to lacking a language, atheism, for Febvre, also lacked a medium. The sixteenth century, he argued, was "a century that wanted to believe," a culture saturated with a religiosity that presupposed an unchallenged belief in the existence of God.⁶ What, then, were all the theological references to actual incredulity within the flock, to complaints against providence, to refusal to believe? For Febvre, they were, at most, references to occasional "personal impulses and moods." Such impulses and moods, deprived of any systematic or linguistic foundation for coherent disbelief, evidenced merely an ephemeral "unbelief of despair, expressed in the shout of a poor man covered with bruises. . . . or perhaps the unbelief that was a revolt against the triumph of injustice."⁷ Febvre did not deny the possibility that faced with tragic experience, or aching to offend the smug, individuals in the sixteenth century might rage at the heavens, but this, if it occurred, was "disbelief" without historical significance:

To deny, to deny effectively, no matter what the denial is directed against, is not simply to say, out of caprice, whim, or a vain wish to attract attention, "I deny." To deny is to say deliberately and calmly, "For such and such reasons, which are valid for every man and every normally constituted intellect, it appears impossible to me, truly impossible, to accept such and such a system." . . . [Such reasons] could not be fragmentary reasons or special reasons. They had to form a veritable cluster of coherent reasons lending each other

⁴ Febvre, *Unbelief*, 131–46. (The seventeenth century did not share the doubts of some scholars and theologians today concerning the authorship of Ephesians.)

⁵ *Ibid.*, 206, 364–69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, "Conclusion."

⁷ *Ibid.*, 459–60.

support. . . . If this cluster could not be formed . . . the denial was without significance. It was inconsequential. It hardly deserves to be discussed.⁸

As strong as Febvre's case might be for the nature of so many sixteenth-century accusations of atheism against prominent heretics, philosophers, and men of letters, his case for the "unthinkability" of atheism seems, in several ways, problematic. First, it is by no means evident that his enumeration of accusations is adequate, or that far more precise charges were not made. Second, the argument about Latin is interesting, but certainly arbitrary in and of itself, and seemingly belied by both prior and later Latin works expressing fundamental challenges to the beliefs of the dominant culture. The most notorious "atheistic" manuscript of the seventeenth century, for example, was the Latin *Theophrastus redivivus*, which revealed far more familiarity with the "dead" than with the living, and with Latinity than with the vernacular.⁹ Third, his thesis begs the question of the relationship between, on the one hand, "impulse and mood" and, on the other, formal thought in matters of denial and disbelief. New and positive metaphysical and conceptual systems certainly require some pattern of thought similar to that described by Febvre's rather strict criteria for historical significance, but it is by no means clear that disbelief and denial, to achieve significant causal agency or to merit historical attention, need occur in such ways. Finally, with Rabelais and the poets as his quarry, Febvre looked more at literary culture than at theological and philosophical culture, and it is possible that the view would not be the same from other vantages.

François Berriot found Febvre arbitrary in almost all regards and concluded that Christian apologists of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had identified and described contemporaneous incredulity with enough detail that one might find in their works the atheists' "catechism" that the century would not permit the atheists themselves to write. Where for Febvre anathematizations of atheism were above all a window into the minds of the anathematizers, for Berriot they were a window into the minds of the anathematized. The sixteenth century, in his view, was an age of deep political, economic, social, and religious crises, producing alienated and marginal elements in whom the impulse to reject dominant beliefs resulted in a genuine and even codifiable atheism. At the dawn of capitalism, he would have it, the sixteenth century reacted to the anguish of the world by providing France with its "first atheists."¹⁰ Heterodoxy and skepticism "seem indeed to culminate, toward the year 1550, in diverse forms of deism and even atheism, in the lettered public at least."

⁸ Ibid., 352.

⁹ Guido Canziani and Gianni Paganini, eds., *Theophrastus Redivivus*, edizione prima e critica, 2 vols. (Florence, 1981–1982). See infra, pt. 2, chap. 7.

¹⁰ Berriot, *Athéismes*.

Since such men obviously could not publish, "we are thus reduced to knowing such opinions from the testimony of those who combat them . . . which allows us to determine quite well what were the theories of the first 'atheists.'"¹¹

The *marginaux* whose anguished lives, for Berriot, contributed to the first appearance of atheism, tend to disappear from view, however, once he turns to the atheists of the "catechism," who would seem to be simply heterodox men of letters. There is a strange chasm between the socially alienated figures of the first half of Berriot's work and the alleged authors of the atheists' catechism. Further, this atheistic "catechism" turns out often enough to be precisely what Febvre himself had in mind as evidence for his own thesis that almost any heterodoxy could earn the label of atheism. Berriot offers evidence of unspecified doubts about creation and providence; heterodox or rationalist critiques of orthodox Christian beliefs, or aspects of Christian beliefs; Judaizing monotheism; pantheism; and the justification of the pursuit of pleasure.¹² The issue, however, is not whether the sixteenth century witnessed heterodox thought, magical naturalism, Averroistic revivals or continuities, Satanism, and new superstitions, the heart of Berriot's cognitive evidence, but, given his title ("Atheisms and Atheists in Sixteenth-Century France"), whether or not it produced an atheism in any way distinguishable from these. There is nothing in Berriot's two volumes to suggest that it did.¹³

Above all, from Berriot's own evidence, the portrait of the atheist is behavioral and normative, not conceptual and cognitive: he is described as being without religion, as living without God, as attached to the sensual things of this world, as voluptuous, carnal, and, the seemingly most common source of the charge, as given to frequent taking of the Lord's name in vain. Protestant apologists might well have termed "atheists" those Catholic soldiers who supposedly called out, while slaughtering Calvinists, "Where is your God now?" but historians should perhaps avoid reading too much disbelief into such insult added to ultimate injury.¹⁴ The question of whether the sixteenth-century homosexual ever expressed doubts about the providential ordering of nature and society is both important and profound, but it is not answered by Berriot's recognition that "the accusation of atheism goes hand in hand with that of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, 593.

¹² *Ibid.*, 591–818.

¹³ Berriot, for example, ends vol. I with a long analysis of the heterodox *De tribus impostoribus*, after having conceded (I, 546–76) that "the famous pamphlet is indeed the work of a deist and not an atheist." He also conceded (I, 575) that "the 'libertines' of the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, with just a few exceptions [whom he does not specify], often will limit themselves to repeating the arguments of Julian [the Apostate] and above all of Celsus." That is to say, they limited themselves to arguments not for atheism, but against Christianity.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 128–39.

homosexuality [in the sixteenth century].”¹⁵ Indeed, that recognition would seem to support Febvre’s thesis, or, more precisely, the simple equation of “atheism” and moral “ungodliness” in early-modern usage. Inferring belief from behavior (on the assumption that no one who believed in God, for example, could employ an oath that violated God’s commandment), early-modern sermonizers could well confound blasphemous curses and “denial of God.”¹⁶ The historian (from mere acquaintance with colleagues, let alone the past) should not be so precipitous. For example, Berriot’s sharpest example of a “negateur de Dieu” in his discussion of blasphemy and sacrilege is that of a man who merely refused to attend vespers and masses, and who was described by accusers who did attend Catholic services as living solely for pleasure.¹⁷ It is undeniable, to cite another case, that apologists often could not believe rural bestiality compatible with belief in God, but this is *not* the stuff of “catechisms” of disbelief.¹⁸ In his own conclusion, Berriot recognizes that the atheist is portrayed, above all else, as a libertine, as someone seeking a rationale for pursuing the pleasures of the earth.¹⁹ This is surely a window into the minds of the accusers and, perhaps, taking account of polemical exaggerations, onto the worldly behavior of the accused; it is certainly not evident that it is a window into the minds of the accused.

Berriot, in brief, has begged the issue of what one should infer from accusations of atheism; Febvre has begged the issue of thinkable disbelief in orthodox Latin Christendom. I shall address both issues directly in the course of this work.

. . .

A culture that, in general, chose to conflate behavioral and conceptual “atheism,” the “denial” of God being the perceived sin, whatever its precise manifestation, has confused countless scholars. At times, it could confuse itself. In the spring of 1728, the priest Guillaume, curé of Fresnes, was placed in the Bastille as “an atheist.” The abbé Couet, *grand vicaire* and canon of Notre Dame, examined Guillaume’s papers for the police and found in his writings “several false principles contrary to sound theology,” above all touching on what virtually all theologians took to be the thorny issue of the nature of God’s ideas of the creatures. As Couet noted, however, “one could not accuse someone of impiety who has lost his way in matters so abstract, *unless one found other proofs of his cor-*

¹⁵ Ibid., 389.

¹⁶ In all of Berriot’s discussion of “blasphemers and deniers of God” (I, 128–39), there is not a single example of anything more “atheistic” than the taking of God’s name in vain.

¹⁷ Ibid., I, 136.

¹⁸ Ibid., 171.

¹⁹ Ibid., II, 819–45.

rupted sentiments." In fact, Couet concluded, what makes Guillaume's writings so suspect is "the manifest debauchery and libertinism of his morals . . . and [his] jokes on [the subject of] religion." Guillaume was sentenced to ten months in the Bastille, after which he was sent into monastic seclusion.²⁰ In short, perhaps a lover, or a drunken joke at some superior's expense, and a notebook of abstract and earnest theology, were all that were involved in such a case.

Further, a culture that often did not distinguish between denying the "true" God and denying that there was a Supreme Being at all could produce similar confusions. In August 1729, for example, a police memoir warned of the "self-proclaimed wits" of the Parisian cafés who spoke against "religion." "If order is not restored," the inspector urged, "the number of atheists or deists will grow, and many people will make a religion of their own design for themselves, as in England."²¹ This may be no more than a response to irreverence toward the Catholic church. In that same month, the police noted the case of the bookseller Morléon, who was selling, "to many people, abbés and others . . . several works filled with impieties and maxims contrary to the existence of God." Now there, at last, is a phrase that sounds specific enough, "maxims contrary to the existence of God." It is the phrase that in the yet looser language of the sixteenth century made Berriot quite certain of the reality of actual atheists. However, when police agent Haymier was asked to examine Morléon's case, he reported on the content of the texts in these terms: "The manuscripts that [Morléon] is selling . . . treat of the history of earliest times, of the first man, of the history of Egypt, of the patriarchs from the calling of Abraham to the exodus of the Israelites. He has others that discuss the life of Jesus Christ, his origin, and the errors introduced after his death." Morléon was released after one month, having promised never again to sell works "filled with impiety."²²

. . .

If one accepts the culture's equation of any heterodox views with "atheism," the result, while scholarly, can sound more than paradoxical. Don Cameron Allen's study of "faith and skepticism," *Doubt's Boundless Sea*, focused on such figures as Pomponazzi, Cardan, Vanini, Montaigne, Charron, Bodin, Blount, Oldham, and Rochester.²³ While the chapter ti-

²⁰ François Ravaisson, ed., *Archives de la Bastille: Documents inédits*. 19 vols. (Paris, 1866–1902), xiv, 197–201.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 221–22.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Don Cameron Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 1964).

bles spoke of "Three Italian Atheists," "Three French Atheists," and "The Atheist Redeemed," Allen's preface made plain the limits of these terms:

For the Renaissance, in general, an atheist was one who could not accept any religious principle shared by all Christian creeds. A Jew, a Mohammedan, a deist was an atheist, and the definition could be narrower: to many Protestants, the Pope was the chief of Roman Catholic atheists; to many a Roman Catholic, Canterbury was head of the Anglican atheists. None of the men in my present study called himself an atheist, none denied the existence of God. With very few exceptions, this statement holds true for all the atheists indicted by the orthodox opposition.²⁴

Let us leave the historians, however, who can speak for themselves, and turn to France in the early-modern age.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., vi.

²⁵ For other approaches to and conceptions of the problem, see also *Actes du colloque international de Sommières*, ed. André Stegmann: *Aspects du libertinisme au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1974); Antoine Adam, *Le mouvement philosophique dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1967) and *Théophile de Viau et la libre pensée française en 1620* 2d ed. (Geneva, 1965); Henri Busson, *La pensée religieuse française de Charron à Pascal* (Paris, 1933) and *La religion des classiques (1660–1685)* (Paris, 1948) and *Les sources et le développement du rationalisme dans la littérature française de la renaissance*, rev. ed. (Paris, 1957); Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile: Modern Atheism. A Study of the Internal Dynamic of Modern Atheism, from Its Roots in the Cartesian 'Cogito' to the Present Day*, trans. Arthur Gibson (New York, 1968) [translated from his *Introduzione all'ateismo moderno* (1964)]; Tullio Gregory, *Theophrastus Redivivus: Erudizione e ateismo nel Seicento* (Naples, 1979); Tullio Gregory, G. Paganini, et al., *Ricerche su letteratura libertina e letteratura clandestina nel Seicento . . .* (Florence, 1981); Hermann Ley, *Geschichte der Aufklärung und des Atheismus*, 5 vols. to date (Berlin, 1966–); Fritz Mauthner, *Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendlande* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1921); René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1943); J. S. Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (London, 1960); and D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1972), 132–63. [After this book was completed, a new work by Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, 1987), was sent to me for review. Father Buckley already has illuminated some of the most difficult questions in the long-term history of philosophical theology (see his capacious and acute *Motion and Motion's God: Thematic Variations in Aristotle, Cicero, Newton and Hegel* [Princeton, 1971]). His new work is a rich and provocative study of three centuries of religious (or, more precisely, areligious) development, and what he sees as the "self-alienation" of religion. As history of ideas, its approach and findings in many ways make an interesting two-sided coin with my own study of the behavior of an intellectual community. As readers will infer from my discussion of the Cartesian and Malebranchist theological impulse, however, *infra*, pt. 3, chap. 10, I am not sure that one *historically* should distinguish quite so categorically as he perhaps does between "philosophy" and "religious experience." The interested reader will find my review of Father Buckley's work in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* XXII, no. 4 (Summer 1989), 614–17.]

PART ONE

**Atheists without Atheism;
Atheism without Atheists**

Chapter One

ATHEISTS WITHOUT ATHEISM

TO JUDGE by a commonplace theme of the learned literature of the age, "the atheist" was almost everywhere in early-modern France but, strictly speaking, did not exist. This was a paradox appropriate to a culture that was at times obsessed by the image of the atheist and that simultaneously claimed to dismiss his would-be conclusions as unthinkable.

The atheist could be both ubiquitous and without true atheism, since *being an atheist*, book after book agreed, was a function solely of the will, while *thinking as an atheist* obviously referred in some essential way to a function of the mind. The atheist, it was claimed, could *will* himself into being but could not truly *think* atheistically. In that sense, the atheist was presented as a distorted mirror image of the idealized believer. The ideal of Christian intellectual life was faith in search of understanding. The Christian, in his own self-portrait, believing by the will in revelation (with many a different view of the relationship between grace and volition), sought to understand, and discovered in the content of belief, to the delight of the mind, a satisfying, true knowledge of what otherwise made no or little sense. The atheist, in Christian portrait, disbelieving in God only by his will, sought intellectual justification for that disbelief but could go no further than ignorance and self-contradiction. The existence of God, the great majority of teachers proclaimed, was so manifest and inescapable a truth that no people ever had not recognized it, no sane philosopher ever had denied it, no sincere seeker after truth ever had disbelieved it. It was the "fool," the "*homo stultus*," "*l'insensé*," of the Fourteenth Psalm who had said "in his heart" that "there is no God." The culture taught that he had to be a fool, for no one of sense could say that; and he had to say it in his heart, for no one could think it in his mind. As the Jesuit Rapin put it, early in the eighteenth century, "Of all natural truths, the most deeply engraved in the heart of man is the existence of God. . . . All times, all nations and all schools agree on it." Thus, "there is nothing more monstrous in nature than atheism:

It is a disorder of the mind conceived in libertinism. . . . [The atheist] will be a little mind, puffed up by the success of a sonnet or a madrigal . . . a debauched person who never has had a head free enough nor a mind clear enough to judge sanely of anything. . . . [Atheism is found only among those]

whose minds are the most disordered and whose hearts are the most corrupted.¹

However, there was a second paradox in the manner in which the learned of the culture generally addressed an atheism that, they argued, could not truly be conceived: they explicated and analyzed it in erudite depth and detail, and they demanded that all systems of philosophical theology overcome it. Why should there be so many accounts and refutations of unthinkable ways of thought? Why should there be so many demonstrations of what was evident? Why were there so many cries of intellectual, not only moral, alarm? What, one well might ask, was on their minds?

. . .

It is often difficult, we have seen, to know precisely what early-modern theologians meant by the terms *atheist* and *atheism*. Among the many reasons for this was the seeming equivocation, inherited perhaps from the ancient world itself, in the meaning of godlessness. As Drachmann has argued for the Greeks, *atheistic* generally meant “ungodly,” in the sense of living as if there were no gods or divine laws.² As the early Christians learned when they themselves were accused of atheism, it also meant denying the specific “true” gods of specific places. Saint Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* addressed both meanings. He responded to the charge of atheism against the Christians by replying, “We do proclaim ourselves atheists as regards those whom you call gods, but not with respect to the Most True God.” Addressing the cause of what he took to be the source of actual disbelief, he wrote: “Before God no man has an excuse if he does evil, for all men have been created with the power to reason and to reflect. If anyone does not believe that God takes an interest in these things [virtue and vice], *he will by some artifice imply either that God does not exist, . . . or that He is [as unmoved] as a stone [by human choice].*”³

¹ René Rapin, S.J., *Oeuvres de P[è]re*. Rapin, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1725), I, 422.

² A. B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, trans. I. Anderson (Copenhagen, 1922), 1–13.

³ St. Justin Martyr, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, ed. and trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, 1948), c.6 and c.28. The charge of atheism against the Christians was commonly known through many patristic works, especially that of Lactantius. When Henricus Sivers addressed this issue in a thesis presented under the direction of the eminent German philosopher and theologian Christian Kortholt, in *De Atheismo, veteribus Christianis, ob Templorum imprimis adversationem, objecto, in que eosdem a nostris retorto, Excercitatio* (Kiel, 1689), 1–38, he concluded that the pagan charge of atheism against the early Christians was based on the fact that the latter had no temples, sacrifices, or images devoted to the gods of the country; he noted and cited the many Fathers who, struck by the “iniquity” of the accusation, were obliged to respond to it.

For almost all early-modern theologians there was, from a Christian perspective, no equivocation here. It was clear to them that those who lived immoral lives would seek to persuade themselves, in desperation, that there was no need to believe in a God who would judge and punish them. To live as if there were no God was to place oneself in peril if there were a God. The “ungodly” atheist, then—that is to say, the immoral man—sought to deflect his terror by denying the specific God who judged and punished mankind and by closing his mind to the abundance of arguments that proved His existence. Indeed, this was also the view taken by Saint Justin Martyr. The atheist could be discerned by his morals, by his opposition to the providential and judgmental Christian God, or by his denial of any Supreme Being. Indeed, in a Catholic context, if one believed Protestants merely to be seeking to avoid the justice of God by denying the Roman church’s possession of the keys to the kingdom of heaven, a judgment more of the sixteenth than of the seventeenth century, then one plausibly could call them atheists too. These were all aspects of the same phenomenon. Further, any argument deemed to give comfort to the morally ungodly might be characterized, as a result, as “atheistic.”⁴ Such perspectives allowed moderate polemicists to identify any position that they took to be perverse, willful blindness to religious truth as “atheism,” and to identify this with an immoral life. Less temperate polemicists could look at the effect of arguments without regard for the element of perverse intent, since an argument that plausibly *could* be used by the perverse achieved the same effect. Almost all polemicists inferred atheism from immoral behavior. Superb at making distinctions, the early-modern commentator could distinguish theoretically among a great variety of possible forms of atheistic expression, only to conflate them all in the end under the rubric of libertine immorality. This sequence of distinction and conflation has confused historians, who, given what followed, understandably have looked for the origins of philosophical atheism, but it appears to have made sense to most early-modern minds. Sometimes the latter formulated the issue in the more formal (and, to us, familiar) terms of a distinction between “practical” and “speculative” atheism, but they generally did so only to make the argument that the second was merely an incoherent product of the first.⁵

⁴ For example, Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze, in his *Entretiens sur divers sujets d’histoire, de littérature, de religion, et de critique* (Cologne, 1733), 384, acknowledged that people termed atheists were “accused, rightly or wrongly, of having called into question [d’avoir révoqué en doute] the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, or of having maliciously furnished others with reasons for doubting these.”

⁵ On the development of this distinction in early-modern European formal philosophy, see the interesting article by David Berman, “The Theoretical/Practical Distinction as Ap-

There were, to be sure, countless variations on the theme of atheism, but the identification of atheism with willed stupidity in support of a depraved life was one of the commonplaces, albeit occasionally challenged, of early-modern theology. Its premise was that atheism (and often the behavior that produced it) was *contra natura*. As Gautier had noted, long before Febvre and Berriot, "In the sixteenth century, two *savants* and two theologians could not dispute without accusing each other reciprocally of sodomy and atheism."⁶ The reason for this phenomenon was not simply polemical, nor in any way necessarily based on any philosophical or skeptical disbelief on the part of the "*marginaux*"; above all, it followed from an assumption about the congruence of behavior and belief. If living as if God would not punish according to His law implied disbelief of doctrines essential to demonstrating divine justice (foremost among which, obviously, was the very existence of God), then why not simply infer the one from the other? The suspect thinker was surely depraved, and the depraved libertine was surely a suspect thinker. The etiology of atheism, it was assumed, was in the depraved will, but the symptoms could be in doubts and objections.

There were many scriptural sources for such a view of disbelief and ungodliness. Before assuming that scandalized theologians correctly recorded the correlations of their culture, then, we should recognize the extent to which the equation of "immoral" behavior and "denial of God" was merely a repetition of biblical commonplaces encountered frequently in their clerical education. First and foremost, there was the "fool" of the Fourteenth (and Fifty-third) Psalm "[who] hath said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" This denial was linked to mankind's iniquity: "They are corrupt, they have done abominable works. . . . they are all together become filthy. . . . Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge?" The Seventy-third Psalm taught of "the ungodly," who were characterized by pride, violence, oppression, wealth, gluttony, and corruption. The Seventy-fourth Psalm decried the "enemies" of God, the "foolish people" who "have blasphemed Thy name" and forgotten the covenant. The Seventy-eighth Psalm explained God's anger against the Israelites for disobedience of His law as punishment of their disbelief: "because they believed not in God; and trusted not in His salvation." The Ninety-fourth Psalm spoke of those who slew the widow, the stranger, and the fatherless, but who believed that "the Lord shall not see." In addition to being wicked, such disbelievers in providential justice were "brutish" and "fools." There were "the wicked" of Job 21:14–15, who asked, "What profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?" and who "say unto God,

plied to the Existence of God from Locke to Kant," in *Trivium* XII (1977), 92–108, which draws examples primarily from British thought.

⁶ Théophile Gautier, *Les grotesques* (Paris, 1853), 71.

Depart from us.” In the New Testament, Jude 4–19 spoke of “ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” These ungodly men could be recognized in three ways: they “believed not”; they committed “ungodly deeds,” including perversions, fornication, and “filthy” dreams; and they complained of and mocked the divine while walking “after their own ungodly lusts.” In short, the ungodly were those “who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit.” To many a theologian, Jude could well have been describing the *libertins érudits*, or perhaps even providing a category in which any description of libertinism had to occur. In Ephesians 3:12, Paul described the gentiles who had known neither Christ nor the Jewish covenant as “without God in this world,” a source for seeing denial or even ignorance of the “true” God as atheism. Finally, much weight was placed on Saint Paul’s judgment, in Romans 1:19–20, that unbelievers were “without excuse,” since the “invisible things” of God were so very “manifest” and “clearly seen” in the visible world. In the verses that followed (Romans 1:21–32), such unbelief was linked to unclean lusts and homosexuality, and, in a breathtaking sequence, to a vast array of sins, all exacerbated by the voluntary nature of both crimes and disbelief:

unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, spiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.⁷

Saint Paul, however, did not undertake to articulate, dissect, and disprove at great length that which was so inane and depraved as to be “without excuse.” The internal dissonance of early-modern attitudes toward “atheism” derived precisely from seeing it as both “without excuse,” and, for whatever reasons, as in need of extensive commentary and refutation. To introduce this dissonance, let us look briefly at four commentaries, drawn from a period of almost one hundred years and from both Catholic and Huguenot worlds of thought.

. . .

In 1641, André d’Abillon, priest and doctor of theology, wrote a “defense” of God against the atheists, *La Divinité défendue contre les athées*.

⁷ Rather than translate from diverse seventeenth-century French Bibles into English, I simply have used the King James version whenever appropriate.

The existence of God, he observed, was both manifest in all of nature and taught by all schools of philosophy. Those who denied this truth were reckless atheists whose “impiety and ignorance” arose solely from the fear, given “the dissoluteness [*débordement*] of their morals,” that God justly would punish them. Knowledge of God’s being in no way depended upon faith or religious experience, since there were a “host” of arguments and demonstrations that established it with the uttermost evidence and certainty. It might well be that there were no atheists “in nature,” but even then, it would be worthwhile to shed light on the adored truth of God’s existence. If there were such atheists, they were a handful of rash figures who said “either by their mouths or, from fear of human justice, by their hearts, that there is no God in the world.” He offered a small and unforbidding list of those who might be characterized as such: among the ancients, Lucian, Diagoras, Theodorus, and Protagoras; among the moderns, Vanini, “and several others.” Given the “libertines” of this current century, however, he urged the importance of showing that one could only be an atheist by an act of willful ignorance.⁸

However, having established a clear agenda—namely, to deprive would-be fearless libertines of any grounds for hoping that they might avoid divine justice—d’Abillon, like almost all of his contemporaries who wrote on the subject, proceeded to weaken the central assumption of his work, the inanity of any atheistic conclusions, by taking these conclusions quite seriously. Eloquence against the atheists was not enough, he urged; one needed “all the rigor of the most scholastic theology” to be sure that “the force of my syllogisms forces the atheists, with enough power, to confess their temerity and ignorance.”⁹ To do that, one had to reason one’s way through the difficulties of a term, “God,” that was “full of equivocation and analogy,” a difficult task, and to establish His existence demonstratively against “the principal objections of the atheists,” objections that should be stated “with all possible force.”¹⁰ Where most medieval summae and commentaries had done this rather concisely, d’Abillon would go on for more than 250 pages, proving God from subtle Scotist arguments, from the Thomist “five ways,” from miracles, from demonology, from prophecy, from conscience, and from the consequences of abandoning such belief, both for society and for the sciences. Along the way, he proposed “atheistic” objections to each of his proofs, some quite easily dismissed (e.g., that the sun was the first cause of all things), and some the object of a bit more concern (e.g., that conscience and human law did not require supernatural explanation).¹¹ Having proved God against particular objections, he defended his conclusion for yet another

⁸ André d’Abillon, *La divinité défendue contre les athées* (Paris, 1641), 1–44.

⁹ Ibid., 1–11, 38–44.

¹⁰ Ibid., “Avis au lecteur,” and 15–28, 315–16.

¹¹ Ibid., 45–314.

85 pages against what he presented as the strongest “propositions” of the atheists. His readers may have found these weak, and many could have identified them as commonplace objections long offered to students of divinity to sharpen their minds upon, but they were not quite what one might expect from debauched fools: (1) that “if a sovereign providence governed this world, there would not be such obvious disorders”; (2) that since “all that we see in the world is . . . composed of matter,” and since “everything that falls under our senses is a simple . . . or mixed body,” we could have no knowledge of a God who “doesn’t fall under our senses”; (3) that “nature . . . suffices to produce all the operations that we admire in the world,” and we need not multiply beings unnecessarily to explain phenomena; (4) that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God, since “if there were a God . . . there would be an infinite goodness . . . [that] would destroy entirely the contrary which is opposed to it”; and (5) that “mysteries,” insisted upon by God, would involve God in impossibilities.¹² Such atheistic propositions, d’Abillon concluded, were so “frivolous” that to risk an eternity of pain on their behalf, when one lost nothing by believing in God, could only be the triumph of malice over reason. All atheists had gone from vice to depravity to blindness to denial of God, and they must never be allowed to tempt any believer onto the same path. For this reason, “there is no punishment violent enough for so dark a crime.”¹³ For the two doctors of the Sorbonne who approved the publication of his work, d’Abillon’s “solid doctrine and powerful reasons” were “capable of confounding atheism,” which was ringing endorsement, but curious for a culture that saw such atheism as “frivolous” from beginning to end.¹⁴

Similarly, the Huguenot David Derodon’s *L’athéisme convaincu* (1659) defined the atheists as “those whom debauchery, bad company, or little knowledge of good letters have so corrupted that they dare to deny publicly the Being who gave them their being.”¹⁵ Against such debauched ignorant men, Derodon offered nine proofs of God, including, among others, the necessity of a creator (from the noneternity of the world), the order of the universe, universal consent, conscience and the awareness of one’s sins, and the need for a prime mover.¹⁶ He warned “those who dispute against the atheists,” however, that they “always should use this first proof [from the noneternity of the world], as being the principal one that demonstratively proves a Divinity. . . . For as to the other proofs, . . . they do not entirely close the atheists’ mouth, not be-

¹² Ibid., 317–402.

¹³ Ibid., 396–402.

¹⁴ Ibid., “Approbation.”

¹⁵ David Derodon, *L’athéisme convaincu. Traité démontrant par raisons naturelles qu’il y a un Dieu* (Orange, 1659), 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3–147.

cause they have solid replies to overturn them, but because they have enough evasions to elude them.”¹⁷ Might one not think the evasion of eight of nine proofs a solid accomplishment for those who were atheists by debauchery, bad friends, and ignorance?

In the Jesuit Jean Dez’s posthumously published *La foy des chrétiens . . . justifiée* (1714), belief in God was presented as a principle accepted by “all times, all peoples, and all men,” such that “atheists, *if there be any*,” would have to argue that nature “had belied her reputation [for wisdom] on this point alone by deceiving all mankind.” The “few atheists whom people have believed to see in all centuries” were abominable enemies of goodness and probity.¹⁸ Nonetheless, he portrayed them in terms often assigned by the very learned to the great multitude of the less learned, as those “who want to believe only what they see,” and he attempted to refute them by reference to metaphysical demonstrations from contingency, necessary being, degrees of perfection, natural order, first cause, and prime mover, and to proofs from universal consent, the desire for beatitude, and the willingness to suffer martyrdom for the good.¹⁹

In Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze’s “Dissertation sur l’athéisme et sur les athées modernes” (1733), the former Benedictine and now Huguenot author explained that atheism would not be such a terrible crime if it were, in fact, “only an error of the understanding.” Given the incomparable clarity of the proofs of the Divinity, however, it was obvious that it was impossible for it to be such an error. “Atheism,” he wrote, “cannot be born elsewhere than in a very disordered and very corrupted heart” and is always sired by “the unruliness of the will.” It was not “natural to men,” but produced by pride, self-love, and libertinism. Far from being a “system,” it was voluntary doubt, taking the form of “difficulties” posed to the proofs we have of God. Such being the case, he warned, there could be no more “extravagant” or dangerous opinion than what he described as the widely articulated view that “great minds are more subject to atheism than others,” and the learned should stop accusing each other falsely of this utmost crime.²⁰

In short, then, atheism was a willful refusal to believe, and it was with-

¹⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸ Jean Dez, S.J., *La foy des chrétiens . . . justifiée contre les déistes, les juifs, les sociniens et les autres hérétiques . . . où l’on montre qu’elle est toujours conforme à la raison*, ed. P. de Laubrusse, 4 vols. (Paris, 1714), III, 12, 41, 45–47. Dez had been *recteur* of the Jesuit seminary of Strasbourg from 1682 to 1691, and *recteur* of the University of Strasbourg from 1704 to 1708 and from 1711 until his death in 1712, and had been *gouverneur* of the Jesuits in “Champagne, Gallo-Belgique et Paris.”

¹⁹ The reference to “*les athées, qui ne veulent croire que ce qu’ils voyent*” is found in *ibid.*, III, 36; the refutation of atheism is found in III, 14–55.

²⁰ Veyssière de La Croze, “Dissertation sur l’athéisme et sur les athées modernes,” in *Entretiens*, 250–457. See, in particular, 250–84.