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HOW THE REFORMATION TRAINED US TO BE SCEPTICS

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Welcome to the second of these lectures which are reconsidering the history of atheism and unbelief in western Europe, and are shifting our attention to an earlier stage of that history than we usually look at. Last time we were hunting that elusive beast, the medieval atheist, but now our quarry is starting to break cover. The sixteenth century, the century when western Christendom's unity was shattered by the Protestant Reformation and the age of religious division and war that it triggered, was also the age when the word *atheist* came into common usage, and most histories of atheism at least recognise that it is a part of the story. But what part?

Here is one way to tell that story. Martin Luther defied the Pope, and the result was that western Christendom split into rival parties, each of which regarded the others' errors as intolerable. As they dug their trenches and pounded each other with their artillery, first polemical and then literal, they tore up the religious landscape that they were each trying to control until it could no longer be recognised. With all sides condemning each other for their false beliefs, it was hard to prevent civilians caught in the crossfire from reaching the conclusion none of the combatants wanted: what if all of them are wrong? As battles subsided into exhausted ceasefires and frozen conflicts, ordinary people and their governments began systematically to evade those conflicts and the terrible destruction they could cause by confining 'religion' to a private sphere and creating a new 'secular' public space. People who could not agree about religion could at least work around it, and eventually discovered that they did not particularly miss it. And so religion was confined to quarters, like a once-formidable relative sent to a nursing home: spoken of with respect, paid a ritual visit occasionally, its debts honoured, but not allowed out in public where it might cause distress or embarrassment. In truth – though it would be crass to say so out loud – it was simply kept ticking over until it died a natural death.

It is a powerful story, with a good deal of truth in it. But the world it explains is not quite the world we have. It does not explain why European Christianity endured for so many centuries after the Reformation; nor why, in our own times, a religiously fractured society like the United States is so much less secular than relatively homogenous ones like Norway or France. Above all, it mistakes the part that unbelief played in the Reformation itself. Unbelievers did not merely play supporting roles, as battlefield medics or architects of postwar reconstruction. Unbelief was a decisive part of the action from the beginning.

The Protestant Reformers saw their movement as – amongst other things – a crusade against 'superstition'. That immensely useful word was applied to any false, misconceived or misdirected religious practice. And since classical times, it had had an opposite: impiety, or atheism. So this was the unwelcome choice set before Christians in the Reformation age. If your balance on the knife-edge of true religion wavered, and you were forced to fall either to superstition or impiety, which way would you go? Your answer to that question more or less determined whether you were Catholic or Protestant. Catholics might loathe superstition, but if it came to it, they would, as Thomas More said, rather be superstitious than impious. Better to eat the religious diet put in front of you, however questionable, than to turn up your nose and risk starvation. By contrast, Protestants became Protestants because it was better to be famished than to devour what they called 'the pestiferous dung of papistry'. Superstition was so appalling that they would risk flirting with unbelief in order to be rid of it. As one Catholic put it, not unfairly: 'a Catholic may commonly become sooner Superstitious, than a Protestant; And a Protestant sooner become an Atheist, then a Catholic'.

Protestants denied it, of course. They said they were steering the narrow course between the opposing dangers. But the undertow consistently pulled them one way. Listen to how Henry More, a subtle and moderate English Protestant theologian of the mid-seventeenth century, explained the growth of atheism in his own times. In the Reformation, he argued, God had graciously permitted 'a more large release from Superstition ... a freer perusal of matters of Religion, then in former Ages'. The devil, however, had spotted an opportunity 'to carry men captive out of one dark prison into another, out of *Superstition* into *Atheism* itself'. The smashing of the 'external frame of godliness', the cage which had kept medieval Europeans in 'blind obedience', meant that many of them now simply gave in to their unrestrained sinfulness:

> Being emboldened by the tottering and falling of what they took for Religion before, they will gladly ... conclude that there is as well no God as no Religion.

More saw opposing this kind of atheism as his life's work. But the one solution he would never consider was to rebuild the prison.

As Catholics pointed out, this was not some regrettable side-effect of Protestantism. It was integral to it. The Protestants' entire business was to mount frontal assaults on long-accepted Christian doctrines, mercilessly mocking anyone gullible enough to believe the ridiculous lies spewed out by the priests of Antichrist. But these Protestants were still Christians, indeed Christians committed to preaching the supreme value of faith. They derided credulity, but had no wish to foster incredulity.

This problem – how do you reject some beliefs while still embracing others? – is an old one for Christians. Traditionally the solution involves carefully chosen acts of defiant credulity: you believe the unbelievable *because* it is unbelievable. That is how you show that your faith has transcended reason. The early Church Father Tertullian said that he believed in Christ's incarnation 'because it is absurd'. This can turn into a kind of pious eating contest, in which the contestant who swallows the most implausible claim wins. So you may find yourself arguing simultaneously that your beliefs are reasonable and logical, and also that they are mysteries which surpass reason and are inaccessible except through faith. Because in Christian terms, that is itself powerful proof that those beliefs are true.

This is not anti-rational. If it looks so to us, that is because we understand *reason* differently from our forebears. Since the eighteenth century, we have thought of reason chiefly as a method: the application of logic to solving problems, a steady, prosaic and scientific process. To medieval and early modern minds, reason was not a method but a power of perception, or intuition. How do you know that 1 + 1 = 2? On the premodern view, the answer is simply that you know intuitively that it is so. The God-given faculty of intuition which provides that knowledge is called *reason*. If your reason is defective, or absent, you will not be able to see it. And if that is the case, there is no persuading you. Blaise Pascal, the brilliant seventeenth-century mathematician, philosopher and Catholic mystic who sat at the fulcrum of these two views of reason, distinguished between the 'mathematical' and 'intuitive' mind. There are uncontested truths, he argued, which the mathematical mind cannot prove: 'knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number'. Accepting such truths is not a process of logical deduction. It is much more like a leap of faith.

In which case, reason teaches us that reason itself is fallible. Since reason is a power to perceive truths that lie outside us, there is in fact nothing more rational than to submit your reason humbly to those authorities that are set above it. The word for that is *faith*. To defy those authorities in the name of reason is to do violence to reason itself. So if there is any apparent conflict between our frail and fallible rationality and the certainties of the true faith, it stands to reason that reason should give way.

But the Protestant Reformation used reason as a battering-ram against this entire structure. Alarmed Catholics were quick to warn that their enemies were decaying 'from faithful believing, to carnal reasoning'. And so as well as defending their doctrines as logical and rational, Catholics emphasised that the Protestants were guilty of something much worse than making mistakes about theology. They were revealing themselves to be incredulous – and therefore, in Christian terms, self-evidently wrong.

This battle over credulity was fought above all in one arena: the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the long-established claim that when a priest consecrates bread and wine during the Mass, it is wholly, physically, but undetectably transformed into the literal, human flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. Protestants of course rejected this. But most Protestant arguments against transubstantiation boiled down to claiming that it was impossible or ridiculous, and to call something impossible is to say that God cannot do it – which sounded blasphemous.

In the mid-1540s a group of English Catholics laid out a defence of transubstantiation, asserting both that it was reasonable but also, as one of them put it, that it transcended rationality and credibility, 'surmounting incomparably all wit and reason of man. ... The more that [a doubter] by reason, ransacketh and searcheth for reason, in those things that passeth reason ... into the further doubt he falleth'. These Catholics did not disapprove of reason, but of *carnal* reason: doubting, self-based and so self-limiting. Richard Smith, the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, argued that in the doctrine of the Mass

> there be many things that appear strange ... unto carnal reason. ... Unless we believe we shall not understand. ... Unless we ... think ourselves unworthy, and unable to know ... such high mysteries and secret things, the said mysteries and secret things shall be hid from us.

The most formidable of these writers, Bishop Stephen Gardiner, argued that even to ask how the miracle of transubstantiation was performed was 'a token of incredulity'. He pointedly praised Christ's apostles who, when Christ had spoken about his body being eaten, had 'needed no further explanation to understand it, but faith to believe it'. The reason the Protestants could *not* understand it was not because they were stupid, but because they were faithless.

What made this so effective was that it was so nearly true. Protestant attacks on the Mass really did have a whiff of incredulity about them. They tended to meet the Catholics' philosophical precision not with counter-arguments, but with derision. How can Christ's body be in so many places at once? With all those Masses celebrated daily, surely Christ's body must be the size of a mountain? – as if those thoughts had never occurred to Thomas Aquinas. They used scoffing hypothetical cases: if someone is seasick after receiving the sacrament, does he vomit his Saviour half-digested onto the deck? According to one Protestant, Catholics are

> not ashamed to swear, that … they eat [Christ] up raw, and swallow down into their guts every member and parcel of him: and last of all, that they convey him into the place where they bestow the residue of all that which they haue devoured.

That is not an argument; it is a gag reflex. And it proved his opponents' point.

The sly French Catholic essayist Michel de Montaigne, who we'll be hearing more of, believed that the Protestants' reckless scorn had started a fire that swept quickly out of control amongst the common people.

> 'Once you have put into their hands the foolhardiness of despising and criticizing opinions ... and once you have thrown into the balance of doubt and uncertainty any articles of their religion, they soon cast all the rest of their beliefs into similar uncertainty. They had no more authority for them, no more foundation, than for those you have just undermined. ... They then take it upon themselves to accept nothing on which they have not pronounced their own approval, subjecting it to their individual assent.'

Before long rueful Protestants were agreeing. The devil, it was said, whispered in believers' ears: 'You thought that this and that was a *truth*, but you see now it comes to be *debated*, it proves but a *shadow*, and so are other things you believe, if once they were *sifted* and debated.' Well-documented stories individuals who went from the old Church to Protestantism and beyond to more radical scepticism began to pile up.

But in case Catholics were inclined to be smug, this was not a uniquely Protestant problem. In this battle over credulity and incredulity, Catholics and Protestants matched and parried one another blow for blow. Protestants

were just as quick as Catholics were to wield accusations of incredulity, insisting piously that God wanted 'not a curious head, but a credulous and plaine heart', and lambasting Catholics' supposed use of 'blind and foolish' reason. Some even tried to turn the tables on transubstantiation, claiming that the doctrine was so lumpish and carnal that it amounted to atheism. On his deathbed in 1551, John Redman, a giant of theology at Cambridge University whose long-standing Catholicism was now crumbling into doubt, wrestled openly with this subject. Anxious friends at his side asked him to affirm his faith in transubstantiation. He replied that the doctrine as usually formulated 'was too gross', and sounded uncomfortably like cannibalism. His questioners rephrased the question more delicately: did he agree that Christ's body was received in the mouth?

> He paused and did hold his peace a little space, and shortly after he spoke, saying: 'I will not say so; I cannot tell; it is a hard question. But, surely,' saith he, 'we receive Christ in our soul by faith. When you speak of it other ways, it soundeth grossly.'

If you are a Catholic, his faith was seeping away. If you are a Protestant, he was now seeing beyond crude, faithless literalism to the deeper, spiritual reality. It was the distinction, as the poet George Herbert put it the next century, between looking *at* glass or looking *through* it. Herbert, perhaps orthodox Protestantism's finest poet, was uncharacteristically blunt on the question of transubstantiation. Christ, he wrote, came 'to abolish Sin, not Wheat. ... Flesh ... cannot turn to soul. / Bodies and Minds are different Spheres.' That *cannot* is the heart of the matter. To Catholic ears it is incredulity, binding God's omnipotence in the weak chains of human reason. To Protestants it is an insistence that the Catholic doctrine fundamentally misunderstands Christ's sacrifice and drags him down to the filth of humanity.

The accusation of incredulity was an invaluable way of explaining why your arguments had failed to persuade the other side. Not because they were idiots who could not follow an argument, but because they were fools, who said in their hearts that there is no God – even if they did not admit it to themselves. Your dispute was therefore not fundamentally about doctrine or interpretation. It was about your opponents' carnal inability to see the ravishing spiritual vision which was before your own eyes. Defined that way, you could lay claim to an effortless superiority while simultaneously closing down any possibility of further argument. And so the pursuit of ever more authentic faith generated constant accusations of unbelief.

So Protestants mocked Catholics as credulous; Catholics scorned Protestants as incredulous; Protestants lambasted Catholics as incredulous; naturally enough, completing the square, Catholics derided Protestant credulity when they had the chance. Here the focus was the Bible, the fundamental source of religious authority for Protestants. The question is, how can you know that the Bible is in fact the inspired Word of God? Protestants had lots of answers to this, but most of them in the end came down to a matter of faith: The Bible's authority was, they claimed, self-evident, in the sense that the Holy Spirit convinces you as you read that it is true. And if he doesn't convince you of this, well, clearly you are an outcast unbeliever whom God has rejected.

Catholics made hay with this. So, ran the argument, the Holy Spirit teaches you that the Bible is the word of God? Does this inner conviction extend equally to all sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament? To every chapter and verse of them? And to nothing else? Does the Spirit then guide your understanding of it? If so, why do so other readers interpret it differently? If not, how can it be that the Spirit authorises Scripture but lets people misinterpret it? And what about the textual glitches and variations between different manuscripts of the Bible – which is the inspired version? How can you be sure? Has the Spirit told you that too? The purpose of this Catholic argument was of course not to dismiss the Bible, but to prove that the Bible's authority ultimately derived from the Church, to which all Christians ought to submit. But it was much easier to demolish Protestants' claims about the Bible than to establish Catholic ones in their place.

All's fair in religious polemic, and we should not take outraged accusations of unbelief entirely seriously. But this much is true: The Reformation era's battle for credulity was a high-wire act. To attack your opponents' doctrines as nonsensical and an affront to reason, while defending your own as incomprehensible and transcending reason, was a heady, exhilarating and dangerous rhetorical achievement. All sides in the Reformation debates were

encouraging both open-hearted faith and corrosive scepticism, teaching believers simultaneously to doubt and to loathe doubting. In this world, scepticism was not the opposite of faith. It was a necessary component of it.

In these debates Catholics and Protestants wrote about one another as if they were different species. But of course the reality was much more frightening. They were the same people, and they were liable to convert from one to the other. Every Protestant of the first generation had been raised a Catholic. Battle-lines hardened thereafter, but conversions in all directions continued. The Reformation offered believers a religious choice. Most of them did not want such a thing and stuck to the faith in which they had been raised, but even that was a choice. For believers to be forced to sit in judgement over their own beliefs was profoundly disturbing.

In 1565, the Protestant preacher Pierre Viret described some alarming people he had met in a southern French city, most likely Lyons. 'Since the abuses of false religion were demonstrated to them, they judge both the true and the false in the same way and despise them both as if all was merely the dreams and reveries of the human mind.' These people had a clear hierarchy of truth. Catholics they dismissed as blind. Protestants were one-eyed. They themselves, who had left all such errors behind, were 'deniaisez'. The word has a double meaning: as well as 'educated' or 'enlightened', it can mean 'deflowered' or 'sexually experienced'. These people were serial converts, whose 'education' in unbelief consisted of the multiple religions through which they had passed. They had attained some enlightenment at the cost of their religious virginity, and could not go back even if they wanted to. Viret's account is a picture of how the Reformation was a journey from innocence to experience. It implies that the battle over credulity and incredulity was ultimately fought, not only between competing religious parties, but also within individual believers. I want to spend most of the rest of this lecture looking at three contrasting individuals – one French, two English – who show how that battle could play out.

First, Michel de Montaigne, writing his *Essays* in genteel retirement amid the French religious wars, condemning those on both sides quick to claim they were killing in God's name. Now Montaigne, for all his avowed Catholicism, has a persistent reputation for atheism. It is true that the *Essays* are – for the most part – astonishingly secular. Montaigne cites the Bible occasionally, but much less than ancient pagans. God rates an occasional passing mention, but so too do Fate and 'mother-like' Nature, and all of them are treated as metaphorical abstractions. The essay 'To philosophise is to learn how to die' does say, in passing, that 'death is the origin of another life', but its main thrust is that we ought to take comfort in death's absolute finality. 'Do you not know', he imagines Nature saying to those who fear death,

> that in real death there will be no second You, living to lament your death and standing by your corpse. 'You' will not desire the life which now you so much lament. ... Death does not concern you, dead or alive; alive, because you are: dead, because you are no more.

So it is certainly clear that his Catholicism was neither simple nor straightforward. He admitted that as a young man he had been drawn to Protestantism, lured by 'an ambition to share in the hazards and hardships attendant upon that fresh young enterprise'. Many years later, some friends were convinced that he was still a Protestant 'deep down inside'. He indignantly denied it, but he admitted that at times he found some Catholic practices 'rather odd or rather empty'. He made fun of his fellow-believers, finding it ridiculous, for example, that Catholics armies treated victory as vindication from God but refused to see defeat as vindication for their enemies. In one of his most famous essays, 'On the cannibals', he argued that the supposedly savage peoples of the Americas were in truth no more barbaric than European Christians. Torturing and burning heretics, he said, is not obviously nobler than cooking and eating people. And he added a jaw-dropping comment, which is too easily missed: 'there is more barbarity,' he said, 'in eating a man alive than in eating him dead'. Since eating living people was not commonplace in sixteenth-century France, Montaigne can only have been referring to the Catholic Mass. A Catholic who could say that was, to put it mildly, capable of impressive imaginative detachment from his own beliefs.

Now we know that Montaigne's intellectual guiding star was the second-century Greek Sextus Empiricus, whose works had recently been rediscovered, and who is the ancient world's most powerful advocate of philosophical scepticism: the doctrine that all knowledge is uncertain. Montaigne had drunk deeply of this. It became a rule for him 'not to believe too rashly: not to disbelieve too easily', and above all not to rely on 'that fine brain of yours'.

'There is a plague on Man,' he stated: 'his opinion that he knows something.' If we search for certainty on any subject, he warned, we will at length discover that 'it is impossible to find two opinions which are exactly alike, not only in different men but in the same men at different times'. No truth is ever definitively established.

This might sound like a short cut to atheism, but that's not how it played out in reality. Philosophical scepticism makes God unknowable, but it also makes the material world and everything else that we think we know unknowable. It is *so* sweeping in its dismissals that it is in the end neither very practical nor very dangerous. Pascal, in the next century, was impatient with it. When we are awake, Pascal argued, 'we know that we are not dreaming'. True, we cannot prove the fact. But that merely demonstrates 'the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all knowledge'. Indeed, with a little nimble footwork, scepticism could be finessed into an argument *for* Christian orthodoxy. Montaigne himself showed how you do it. Once you have accepted that your own reason is 'a two-handled pot: you can grab it from the right or the left', you are forced to look beyond it. Whether you find a doctrine credible or incredible is beside the point. 'It is madness to judge the true and the false from our own capacities.' Instead, we need to look outside ourselves entirely, and for Montaigne that meant looking to 'the holy teachings of the Church Catholic, Apostolic and Roman, in which I die and in which I was born'. Nor could he embrace those teachings with reservations or doubts. 'We must either totally submit to the authority of our ecclesiastical polity or else totally release ourselves from it.' The very fact that he was so beset with doubts showed why he must submit his own feeble reason to the eternal certainties of the Catholic faith once revealed to the apostles and maintained faithfully in France for over a thousand years.

> 'Our religion did not come to us through reasoned arguments or from our own intelligence: it came to us from outside authority, by commandments. That being so, weakness of judgement helps us more than strength; blindness, more than clarity of vision.'

So scepticism does not beget atheism. It is the solvent of all our pretentions to knowledge, and therefore the necessary beginning of any true faith.

Well, up to a point, anyway. This gambit, *fideism* as the philosophers call it, does not actually answer doubts; it bypasses them. And as our second character shows, that comes with a cost.

William Chillingworth was an intense young student in Oxford in the 1620s, given to 'sleeping too little, and thinking too much'. He too discovered Sextus Empiricus, and scepticism went to his head. 'By degrees he grew confident of nothing, and a sceptic, at least, in the greatest mysteries of faith.' In 1629, these mounting anxieties turned into a crisis. He converted to Catholicism, and travelled to an exile seminary in France. It was a bold or desperate decision, whose most likely consequence would be lifelong exile. He did it, he later recalled, in a desperate search for certainty. Catholic arguments had made him doubt that there was any sure and reliable truth to be found in Protestantism, and so he sought it in the bosom of the church of Rome.

But within months he was back in England. The reality of seventeenth-century Catholic life was shockingly different from the idealised universal church he had imagined. But Chillingworth did not slot back happily into Protestantism. For as much as five years, he was 'doubting between communions'. He conferred at length with his godfather, who, conveniently, just happened to be William Laud, bishop of London and future archbishop of Canterbury. Chillingworth's own plan to resolve his crisis, characteristically, was to write a book thrashing it out. He apparently swore an oath before Laud to withdraw from communion with *either* church for two years. He claimed that this was so that the planned book would appear impartial, but he was plainly also buying time for his own indecision. This was still his situation in 1634, when Lady Falkland, Catholic matriarch of a religiously mixed family, hired Chillingworth to be a tutor to her daughters, believing that he was still a Catholic. Instead, Chillingworth encouraged the young women to explore their doubts. He told them that Catholicism was 'founded on lies', and explained that his conversion had been because of 'the unsoundness of Protestant religion ... and not the truth of the Catholic'. He mused to them that 'if a third way were opened, the Catholics would have no less to do to defend themselves than the Protestants'. Unsurprisingly, the Falklands threw him out.

In 1635, he finally conformed to his godfather's church once again. By the time the long-awaited book was published in 1638, it had evolved into an anti-Catholic polemic, titled *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation*. But the 'Protestantism' he was defending was distinctly odd. He had told the Falkland girls that his imagined third alternative to Catholicism and Protestantism, which he called simply 'Christian', would fit better in the Protestant than the Catholic church – not because Protestantism's doctrines were truer, but simply because it was 'not ... so strait-laced'. That seems to have been the spirit in which he eventually conformed. His book firmly rejected the Catholic fideists' claim to find infallible authority in the Church, but he was not simply claiming the Bible as an alternative infallible authority. Instead, he warned that the infallibility which the hard men on both sides offered was an illusion, and tried to find a way of dealing with the fact.

The book's argument falls into two dangerously unbalanced halves. His attack on the Catholic claim that their Church is infallible is devastatingly effective. But he was much less successful in building up his own side of the case than at demolishing his opponents'. How can we be certain that the Bible is God's Word? He could only answer this question by redefining *certainty*. We cannot, he admitted, be certain of the Bible's authority in the same way we can be certain of a mathematical theorem or even of an established scientific fact. At best we can be 'morally certain, as certain as the nature of the thing will bear', certainty, as the lawyers say, beyond reasonable doubt.

In one extraordinary passage in the book's preface, Chillingworth tells his Catholic opponents that if their arguments

> weighed in an even balance ... would have turned the scale, and have made your Religion more credible then the contrary; certainly I should ... with both mine arms and all my heart most readily have embraced it.

There is a juddering, grinding gear-change in the middle of that sentence. At the start he is talking about the most finely balanced of reasoned judgements, made according to the balance of probabilities, which can be tipped by a hair: one of the two religious alternatives might emerge looking fractionally more likely than the other. But having made such a carefully-weighed judgement, he will embrace whichever conclusion he reaches with 'all my heart', free from any doubt. Give him 51% confidence that you are correct, and he will give you 100% commitment.

It is plain enough why he ended up in this bizarre position. He wanted to give 100% commitment, because that is what Christians do. But he no longer believed that much more than 51% certainty is to be had. He had been playing theological beggar-my-neighbour, ensuring that everyone else's religious arguments are left looking as fragile as his own, and was making the miserable best of what was left. It is no surprise that when Chillingworth died only six years later, at the age of 41, the Protestant hard man who attended him at his deathbed was appalled. He failed to persuade Chillingworth into a more conventional Protestantism before he died. Instead, he presided at the funeral, and buried a copy of Chillingworth's book with him, saying, 'Get thee gone then, thou cursed book ... that thou mayest rot with thy author, and see corruption'.

By then England's reading public had been introduced by our third character to another unnerving model of how to be a Protestant in a world of religious uncertainty. Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio medici*, an instant bestseller on its publication in 1642, was a sly meditation on Christianity from a physician's perspective. Browne wanted his readers to know that his religion was not a matter of simple habit: he had actively chosen it. 'The rules of my Religion' were drawn, not from any particular church, but from 'the dictates of my own reason'. If this was not bad enough, he added that reason had once led him to doubt the immortality of the soul and the existence of Hell. He had now left these errors behind him, but he continued to believe that Christian orthodoxy was beset with 'sturdy doubts', and that some of the Bible's stories 'exceed the fables of Poets'. How, he asked, did Noah fit all the world's animals, plus six weeks' fodder, into a 300-cubit ark? After the Flood, how did the animals come to be dispersed across the world so quickly, not least to the Americas? It is difficult, he says, to answer such questions without 'the refuge of a miracle': his distaste for supernatural explanations is palpable. This does not sound much like a defence of the true faith.

But Browne was no atheist. He was a post-atheist: a believer who has returned to faith after a dalliance with unbelief, and has been changed by the experience. The reason he listed all these objections was not to refute them, but to celebrate them. 'Methinks there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith. ... I love to lose myself in a mystery.' To believe something because you are convinced of it by reason 'is not faith, but persuasion'. He eventually conquered his doubts, he says, not with reasoned arguments, but 'on my knees', in prayer. He came to be convinced that true faith is 'to believe a thing not only above, but contrary to reason, and against the arguments of our proper senses'. And he cited Tertullian: 'It is certain, because it is impossible'.

The brutal religious conflicts of the Reformation era did not in fact reduce Christendom's faith to rubble. People like Montaigne, Chillingworth and Browne were not driven into atheism. Those who seriously wanted to hold onto their faith could find honest, intellectually rigorous and emotionally satisfying ways to do so. There was Montaigne's surrender to uncertainty: accept that once you have doubted everything, including your own doubts, there is nothing left but to embrace the ancient faith. There is Chillingworth's armed truce with uncertainty: recognise that absolute truth is beyond our grasp, and resolve to make the best of the shaky and partial truths which our shaky and partial minds can grasp. Or there is Browne's joyful embrace of uncertainty: believe all the more strongly precisely because faith is out of the reach of human reason.

The poet John Donne, a convert to Protestantism who never left his cradle Catholicism entirely behind him, had this advice for anyone unsure when to be credulous and when to be incredulous:

> … Doubt wisely; in strange way
> To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
> To sleep, or run wrong, is. On a huge hill,
> Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
> Reach her, about must and about must go,
> And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.

Montaigne, Chillingworth and Browne had done it. Instead of being consumed by their anxieties, they had doubted wisely, stood still, picked their way up the cragged and steep path, and found their way, if not to the summit, at least to secure and level ground. But not every believer in post-Reformation Europe was such a skilled mountaineer. Anyone who tried to follow them quickly discovered that the climb demanded nimble footwork and a cool head. It is perfectly possible keep your balance when out on a precipice, trying to seize hold of scepticism and bend it to your own purposes while the battle for credulity swirls around you – as long as you don't look down.

What you can't do is go back. Believers of this kind – doubt and anxiety's survivors – are different creatures from their more naive predecessors. Witness the apparent absence of Christianity from most of Montaigne's writings. This is not a sign that he was a closet atheist. It is explained in his remarkable essay 'On prayer', in which he tells us almost in passing that he prayed the Lord's Prayer many times each day and that he 'continually' crossed himself. But in the same essay he deplored the habit of singing the Psalms around the household, or of routinely reading the Bible – 'it is not a story to be told but a story to be reverenced, feared, adored'. And he goes on to explain why his own writings are so conspicuously devoid of religious references. Theology, he argues, is a high mystery and ought to be honoured as such. Mere laymen such as himself should not aspire to it.

> 'The language of men has its own less elevated forms and must not make use of the dignity, majesty and authority of the language of God. [When] I myself ... say ... fortune, destiny, accident, good luck, bad luck, the gods and similar phrases ... I am offering my own human thoughts ... matters of opinion not matters of faith.'

He avoids God-talk not because he despises it but because he reveres it. We ought not to be too quick to prayer, he suggests, since we cannot often put our hearts into a prayerful attitude. He even wonders if 'a decree forbidding anyone to write about religion', priests excepted, would be just and prudent – 'as perhaps would one requiring me too to hold my peace on the subject'. Which he thereafter proceeded to do.

Thomas Browne agreed. Although he advanced his own religious views, he also warned against staking out too bold a position. 'Every man is not a proper Champion for Truth.' You may be sure you are on God's side, but in debate as in battle, victory does not always go to those who deserve it. This, he said, is why he dealt with his own doubts as he did: 'I do forget them, or at least defer them, till my better settled judgement ... be able to resolve them.' Rather than striking off on his own in search of the truth, 'I love to keep the road'.

Do we believe these convenient explanations for apparent godlessness – that these men's lack of conventionally ostentatious piety arose more from scrupulous reverence than from blank indifference? For myself I do, since they were not compelled to make any of these claims: but the matter is certainly open to doubt. When Montaigne justified his argument against frequent prayer by citing the ancient historian Xenophon, not the Bible, maybe he was exemplifying his principles, or maybe he was discreetly signalling that it was all an act. None of us know. And it does not matter, because either way, the result is the same. Take these sceptics and post-sceptics at their word, and accept that as a matter of conscience they were withdrawing their faith reverently from public turmoil, building it a cloister where it could worship undisturbed, in peaceful and honoured seclusion. The effect was still that God was newly absent from most of everyday life. Contemporaries had a word for that absence, however piously it was intended. They called it 'atheism'.