GRESHAM COLLEGE

14 MARCH 2019

How to Be A Puritan Atheist

PROFESSOR ALEC RYRIE

In the last lecture in this series, on the origins and emotional history of atheism and doubt, we were looking at what most people in the premodern world thought unbelief was. That is, a matter of angry rejection of orthodox religion, whether – as preachers tended to imagine – because unbelievers were such depraved people that they longed for any excuse to sink themselves into debauchery, or – as seems to have been as common in reality – because these were people fired with righteous anger at a religion which seemed to them to fall short of true morality. It is mostly a story of angry young men, and as angry young men tend to, it grabs most of the attention. It was also, perhaps, not a very serious threat to Christendom. It was certainly unnerving if some people withdrew from the great religious struggles of the day and started sniping from the side-lines, but the outcome of a battle is rarely determined by deserters. The story I want to tell you today is a different one. It was happening at the same time, but it attracted much less attention. Its emotional register was different: it was not driven by anger but by anxiety. And as I will try to show in this and the next lecture, it was in the end much more consequential.

In 1628, the English satirist and future bishop John Earle published a character-sketch of a stereotypical 'sceptic in Religion'. His audience would have known what to expect: a blasphemous scoffer and incestuous libertine, whose boasted of his contempt for God but who is in truth driven by his sinful lusts. But no. Earle's 'sceptic' is an agonised vacillator, who "would be wholly a Christian, but that he is something of an Atheist, and wholly an Atheist, but that he is partly a Christian ... His whole life is a question". He changes his mind afresh every time he reads something new. He dips his toe into an opinion as "tenderly as a cat in the water and pulls it out again". Earle compares his conscience to a hapless peacemaker trying to intervene in a duel, who is wounded by both sides. But however tentative he may be, he still bridles at any talk of obedience or submission to any Church. He is so paralysed by the possibility of being wrong that he will never settle on anything as right. "He finds doubts and scruples better than resolves then and has always some argument to non-plus himself. The least reason is enough to perplex him, and the best will not satisfy him." Earle's central critique of this man's indecisiveness is that "he is wondrous loath to hazard his credulity, and whilst he fears to believe amiss, believes nothing".

I think this fictional portrait was onto something. I am not very much interested in the arguments and reasons that this 'sceptic' was wrestling with. That is a layer of froth should not distract us. His turmoil was emotional before it was intellectual. Never mind which theological knots he was tying himself in. Look at the mood: agonised indecision.

In one important sense, however, Earle's character was misleading, for like the blasphemers and libertines we have already met, he was an adult male of apparently independent means. The real figures behind the caricature came from all social classes and across the age range, and they included a striking number of women.

On her deathbed in 1601, an English gentlewoman was asked "whether she did believe the promises of God, nor no?" In her answer, she quoted one of the age's favourite Biblical verses, Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." It could be either a banal or a momentous sentiment: The Bible's witness that belief and unbelief could coexist. William Perkins, Elizabethan England's greatest Protestant theologian, warned that "these two thoughts, *there is a God*, and *there is no God*, may be, and are both in one and the same heart". If any of his readers were tempted to reassure themselves that "they never felt in themselves any such conceits as this, *that there is no God*", Perkins warned them that if they weren't not crying out to God to help overcome their unbelief, then perhaps their unbelief had already overcome them.

This was not a new problem, but it was a newly acute one. The Reformation started as an argument about the meaning of 'faith'. Protestants loaded more weight than ever before onto that word. The problem was sharpest of all for Protestants who did not belong to tightly organised and disciplined churches, lacking systematic moral oversight of all church members, so forcing believers to be exclusively responsible for policing their own faith. That applied above all to one country: the kingdom of England, which by the early seventeenth century had become home to a strain of obsessively introspective piety distinguished by contortionist feats of self-examination. It is chiefly the English story we will be following in this and the next lecture, not because England was unique – it was not – but because its peculiarities let us see the case in particularly sharp relief. For at the centre of English Protestants' intense piety was a problem of unbelief.

It started with a very particular form of 'doubt', that is, doubting whether or not you, as an individual, have been predestined by God to be one of the saved, to go to Heaven. To ask that question – not, is there a God? but, has he saved me? – was regularly described as atheism. John Donne distinguished between "the presumptuous Atheist, that believes no God", and "the melancholic Atheist that believes no Jesus applied to him" – that is, who believes in Christ, but denies that they themselves are amongst the saved. In John Bunyan's *The Holy War*, the city of 'Mansoul' is assaulted by Captain Incredulity and an army of Doubters, in which the 'Resurrection-doubters' and the 'Glory-doubters', who deny the immortality of the soul and the existence of Heaven, fight alongside the 'Election-doubters' and the 'Vocation-doubters', who deny that you yourself have been chosen or called to salvation. This might seem perverse, but the rationale was that denying your own salvation was disbelieving God's promises. This is exactly what a penitent whom we know only as I.G. described. After some months of fearful despair, she tried to take comfort in the Bible's promises of God's mercy, but words on a page, even a sacred page, were not enough to still her inner struggles. "I was tempted ... to think that it was not the Word of God, but my own word": whether because she ultimately believed more in her own worthlessness than in Calvinist doctrine, or because she simply did not dare let herself hope.

I.G.'s sufferings were positively transient compared to Hannah Allen's. As a teenager in the 1650s, Allen went through a period of despair in which she was convinced she was damned, and after her husband died in 1664, her agonies returned worse than ever. She considered suicide and repeatedly and seriously self-harmed. In the end the fog gradually lifted, which she ascribed to God's mercy and the passage of time. But what I want you to notice is that during her struggles, her family repeatedly tried to persuade her of God's mercy, and she would have none of it. Once she heard a thunderclap and told her aunt it was a message from God that she was damned. Surely not, said the aunt: The Bible gives no precedents for God working a miracle to convince someone of their damnation. But Allen would not be reasoned with. "My Answer was, 'Therefore my condition is unparalleled; there was never such a one [as me] since God made any creature, either Angels or Men, nor never will be to the end of the world'." At first, she worried that she had committed the so-called sin against the Holy Spirit, the mysterious unforgivable sin mentioned in the Gospels, but soon she concluded that that sin was for amateurs:

> "My Sins are so great, that if all the Sins of all the Devils and Damned in Hell, and all the Reprobates on Earth were comprehended in one man, mine are greater. There is no word comes so near the comprehension of the dreadfulness of my Condition; as that, I am the Monster of the Creation."

Allen tells us that she 'much delighted' in thinking this way, for she was tempted "to give up all for lost, and to close with the Devil and forsake my God". What she truly tormented her was her fleeting glimpses of hope. Better to find cold comfort in certainty, and fall back on the devil, who at least never turns away customers. She would not let herself entertain the unbearable thought that God's mercy might be real. So, doubting her own salvation had indeed metastasised into a thorough denial of basic Christian doctrines.

It was a vicious circle. You fear you are damned, so your faith wavers; and because your faith wavers, you are even more convinced you are damned. In the 1640s, a formerly pious London teenager named Sarah Wight suffered four years of spiritual agonies. As she recalled: "I could see nothing but Hell, and wrath: I was as desperate, as ever was any. ... I felt myself, soul and body, in fire and brimstone already." From that agonised conviction, it was only a short step to wonder if "there was no other Hell, but that which I felt". At least that held out the hope that death would end her sufferings. On that basis she attempted suicide several times,

thinking that "if I made away myself, there was an end of my misery, and that there was no God, no Heaven; and no Hell". But that thought itself convinced her that she "was damned already, being an unbeliever". Another woman, known to us only as M.K., wrestled with her fears of damnation, and felt as if the devil was saying to her:

> "Why dost thou thus trouble thy self? Take thy pleasure, do what thou likest. Thou shalt never be called to an account for anything; for as the wise man doth, so doeth the fool, and both rest in the grave together. There is no God to save thee or to punish thee; all things were made by nature, and when thou doest, there is an end of all thy good and bad deeds."

In desperate straits, unbelief offered a get-out-of-Hell-free card. But M.K. only made it half-way. She became convinced "that there was no heaven, no God, no Jesus, no good angels, only a hell there was, and devils to carry me thither".

Ordinary religious practice could not survive these agonies. Hannah Allen could not even bear the sight of a book, since books meant Bibles: she once knocked a book out of her own child's hands in distress. In the 1640s a Mrs Drake, another godly gentlewoman convinced that she was "assuredly damned", told a minister who came to reason with her that she would neither pray nor read the Bible, "nor ever go to Church again". Since her damnation was certain, "she was resolved to spend the remainder of her time in all jollity and merriment, denying herself of no worldly comforts". She had, in effect, found a religious reason to be irreligious. Or again, Luke Howard, an apprentice shoemaker in the 1650s, suffered lengthy spiritual agonies, and eventually "sought to make merry over it, and to take my fill of the world, with all I could enjoy thereof". He tried to forget God and pursue worldly prosperity. Richard Baxter, the Worcestershire minister who was one of the most popular and humane pastoral theologians of the age, sorrowfully recalled a schoolfriend who was intense in his piety and devotions but who then took to the bottle and despaired at his own sinfulness. Eventually "his conscience could have no relief or ease but in ... disowning the teachers and doctrines which had restrained him", and he fell away from his faith. Even if this was not your experience, months on end staring at an implacable, eternal decree of condemnation might stir the thought that God's justice is not all it is cracked up to be. Hannah Allen reported "dreadful temptations to have hard thoughts of my dearest Lord". Respectable gentlewomen were not supposed to be angry with God, but when such acute sufferings were mixed with relentless sermons about God's power and justice, how could they not be?

These florid outbreaks of suicidal despair were not the norm in post-Reformation England. But they were, I think, canaries in the mine. Some people suffered particularly acutely from anxious unbelief, but even the most robust souls could not keep it entirely out of their lungs. John Bunyan recalled how, as a young man, he had noticed some unexpected thoughts that "came stealing upon me". It began slowly, but within weeks…

> "whole floods of blasphemies both against God, Christ and the Scriptures ... poured upon my spirit, to my great confusion and astonishment. These blasphemous thoughts were such as stirred up questions in me against the very Being of God, and of his only beloved Son: As, whether there were in truth, a God, or Christ? And whether the holy Scriptures were not rather a fable, and cunning story, than the holy and pure Word of God?"

The point, again, is not the substance of his worries but the mood. These 'suggestions', as he called them, "did make such a seizure upon my spirit, and did so over-weigh my heart ... that I felt as if there were nothing else". He compared his struggles against them to a baby's resistance to a kidnapper: spirited, noisy and entirely futile. It felt, he recalled, like a relentless and irresistible assault, and it lasted for about a year.

He was in good company. Seventeenth-century diaries, autobiographies and correspondence are full of references to "risings of Atheistic thoughts", "temptations that there was not a God" or "this horrid temptation, to question the Being of God". "It came questioning into my mind of the truth of God", wrote one Northamptonshire gentlewoman, "seeing many would show a reason in nature for almost everything. This temptation came many times unto me." Richard Baxter, the Worcestershire pastor we met a few minutes ago, recalled that, as a young man, "the tempter strongly assaulted my faith ... especially to question the certain truth

of the sacred scriptures; and also, the life to come, and immortality of the soul". Those who suffered such shameful assaults often instinctively concealed them. "I was troubled, but could not acquaint any with my condition", wrote one woman about her adolescent temptations to unbelief, for "I did not think that it was so with any other as it was with me". Another teenage girl beset by "temptations that there was no God" feared that no-one else had ever entertained such appalling thoughts. "I thought my estate to be singular, and that I should hear books and ballads cried of me about the streets."

In fact, when she finally poured out her distress to an aunt, the older woman was able to reassure her "from her own experience in the like case". Doubts like these were not discussed openly, especially not in front of children, but nor were they rare, and ministers discreetly advised their flocks about how to deal with them. The ministers' advice, and the sufferers' testimony, agreed on one crucial point: these doubts had been thrust unwillingly into their minds by the Devil. Modern readers normally dismiss that sort of claim. I'm not asking you to believe it, but I do think it's a really revealing testimony, for several reasons.

First of all, it shows that these narratives are a literary genre, like the modern genre of narratives of recovery from mental illness. Like that genre, they suffer from survivorship bias. If you lose your battle with doubt in this period, you don't tell your story. What made temptation so indispensable for narrating these crises was that it is a distancing technique. If these terrible thoughts are temptations, then you are not to blame for them. They are the devil's work, and enemy propaganda that shouldn't be heeded: a bombardment which required no response but endurance and resistance.

But it also seems genuinely to have reflected these people's experiences. Doubts crept up on them unawares, seeping to the surface or erupting without warning. At the least, the ever-present language of temptation tells us that although this phenomenon was widespread, it was no sort of movement or party. If these doubters learned their doubts from other people, they were not conscious of it. I have found no accounts of being tempted into unbelief by others. The recurrent fear that no-one else had ever had such terrible thoughts no doubt reflects the experience of feeling God's absence, but it does also suggest that most of these doubters reached their doubts without outside assistance.

So, what did trigger these doubts? Two specific issues recur constantly: the immortality of the soul and the inspiration of the Bible. People who thought they were serene in their faith might be struck suddenly by unexpected doubts when death struck near them: whatever doctrines you believe, there is no denying that death looks very final. And the Bible was a specifically Protestant problem. All of Protestantism's doctrine of authority was compressed between the Bible's covers, and that was a difficult job of containment at the best of times. In the seventeenth century it was made harder by the accumulation of minor textual puzzles and problems uncovered by the new Biblical scholarship. It was starting to look as if the exact text of the Bible might be unknowable. Perhaps this was only a move from 100% confidence to 99% confidence, but as anyone who works with critical systems knows, 99% confidence is an intolerable level of risk. These apparently minor concerns were like chisel taps on a case of dynamite, threatening to blow the whole thing open. One Puritan scholar recorded spending one Sunday in 1653 being "sadly assaulted ... with doubting whether ever word of the scripture were infallible" because of worries about variant versions of the text. Ordinary readers could be forgiven for concluding that certain knowledge of God's Word was beyond their and, perhaps, anyone's reach. So, whenever you sat down to read God's Word, you could not be quite sure that that was what it was. "When I had read the word of God", one woman recalled, the Devil "tempted me with doubts and questions touching some things therein, whether it was truth or not". The thought was a woodworm quietly eating away the crossbeams of your faith. What made these thoughts so insidious was that they framed the problem as insoluble. No faith can be ventured until all traces of uncertainty are banished and attempting to argue the problem away only made it appear more complicated and therefore worse. And it led into a series of other, equally corrosive thoughts: maybe the Bible is a fraud, a trick being played on us by the powerful? With so many different Christian sects to choose from, how do you know which one is true? If any? What about all the other religions in the world? These questions could be answered. Preachers were very confident they could do so. But however neat their answers, they could not stop the questions echoing.

Amid all these anxieties which do seem to have drawn early modern Protestants into unbelief, it is worth noticing one supposedly perennial problem which did not: the classic problem of suffering. It had been a truism since ancient times, and still is today, that worldly suffering could break Christians' faith, by making them question how a good God could permit such terrible things. But I have found virtually no evidence of real people being troubled by this train of thought or being led into unbelief by it in the 17th century. Christians were sometimes angry with God because of their sufferings, but that is not unbelief. In an age which was far more intimately acquainted with quotidian suffering than our own – an age when barely half of children lived to adulthood, and when the best form of pain relief was brandy – we simply do not find evidence that suffering produced loss of faith.

Yet if we widen the lens from worldly suffering, the picture changes. All major Christian denominations in this period taught that much of humanity, probably the vast majority, would eventually endure an eternity of torment in Hell, suffering to which no pain in this world could possibly compare. Preachers enthusiastically used this threat to scare sinners into repentance, but those whose consciences were already tender could be paralysed or even unhinged by dread. As a child, John Bunyan was "so overcome with despair of life and Heaven, that I should often wish ... that there had been no Hell". If you have given up hope of Heaven, then mortalism is far more appealing than traditional Christianity.

The plainest case is that of Ludovic Muggleton, who eventually went on to found a rather eccentric sect known, of course, as the Muggletonians, a name which I like to imagine was lurking somewhere in J. K. Rowling's subconscious when she started writing. Before his sectarian days, in the religious turbulence of 1640s London, Muggleton moved fretfully from church to church, increasingly convinced that 'I must needs go to Hell'. So, he tried hard to persuade himself that there is no God. He couldn't do it – his intuition revolted at the notion – but a different hope crept up on him: even if there is a God, perhaps there is no immortal soul? "I was in good hope at that time, that there was nothing after death." He persuaded himself of this, and for three years "had a great deal of peace of mind in this condition".

> "I thought, if I could but lie still in the earth for ever, it would be as well with me, as it would be if I were in eternal happiness. ... I cared not for Heaven so I might not go to Hell."

But one day in 1651, his long-suppressed belief in eternity came flooding back and his arguments against immortality suddenly felt flimsy. He cast around desperately, even thinking that, since there have been so "many millions of people since the Creation", he might be lucky enough to escape the final judgement due to an administrative oversight. "God may forget me, and not raise me again, then shall I lie still and be quiet." Yet he could not cling to that straw, and unwillingly, desperately acknowledged the truth of eternity. As it happened the crisis did not last long, for that same night that he began to receive revelations and began his career as a prophet. Naturally, his sect abandoned the traditional concept of Hell. The solution was individual; the problem was all too common.

The one plain example known to me of an English Protestant tempted to abandon his faith due to worldly suffering comes from an even more unusual individual. Thomas Traherne was a meditative, riddling poet-priest who quietly discovered deep wells of peace within himself. But as you will expect by now, he was also tempted by unbelief. On one occasion, he tells us, he 'reasoned' with himself thus:

> "If there be a God, certainly He must be infinite in Goodness. ... How comes it to pass therefore that I am so poor? of so scanty and narrow a fortune, enjoying few and obscure comforts? I thought I could not believe Him a God to me, unless all His power were employed to glorify me."

In other words, the classic problem of suffering: but the key detail is that this supposed incident happened when Traherne was four years old. And if he was almost alone in having doubts sparked by suffering, he was certainly not alone in falling into doubt as a child. A lot of the accounts we have already heard come from teenagers. A pioneer of navigation and surveying named Richard Norwood recalled that he was aged about seven when he fell to "reasoning ... about whether there were a God". As so often, it began with questioning his own salvation.

Offhand adult assurances that God loved him felt flimsy. He began to read the Bible in earnest, but when he eagerly shared his Scriptural discoveries with his parents…

> "they made me little answer … but seemed rather to smile at my childishness. Upon which and the like occasions I often doubted whether things were really so as I conceived them or whether elder people did not know them to be otherwise, only they were willing that we children should be so persuaded of them, that we might follow our books the better and be kept in from play. And thus, did atheism show."

As they grow up, all children learn that they have been mistaken, or lied to, about a great many things. When they were told about their invisible God, the thought, 'is this true?', must sooner or later have crossed the minds of many (most? all?) children. Our adult wrestlers with doubt may have been surprised by the strength of the sudden temptations that they met. But they will most likely have discovered, and overcome, unbelief in themselves before.

Now obviously these anxious doubters were not bold pioneers of freethinking. If they were atheists, they were reluctant, even horrified ones. They were drawn despite themselves into entertaining thoughts that they wished would go away.

This is because they saw their 'temptations' as irrational. One mid-seventeenth century serving-maid confessed that 'I am darkened in understanding, and I am tempted to believe there is no God': the darkening and the temptation were inseparable. These insistent thoughts might pretend to be reasonable, but the plain fact was that they contradicted everything that all the wisdom of the age knew to be true. They were tempted to atheism in the same way that we are frightened of flying. With our rational minds we know that a plane will not simply fall out of the sky. But that is not much help as we sit pale-knuckled through a nasty bout of turbulence. When they were able to gather their thoughts, these people knew that there is a God, that the Bible is his Word and that human souls are immortal. Perhaps those truths were counter-intuitive, but so are, for example, some mathematical theorems. These people knew what was true. But like most of us, they struggled to hold onto it.

You can see this in the ways they fought back against these temptations. Their first resort was argument: reminding themselves why these superficially plausible doubts in fact made no sense. I'm not going to go into the barrage of arguments against atheism they mobilised, but I do want to notice the overall shape of the battle. The seventeenth-century attack on atheism was not a drilled, precise philosophical assault. It was a chaotic, indiscriminate charge by enthusiastic, disorganised volunteers who were blithely confident of victory. Martin Fotherby's 1622 book *Atheomastix* took over 200,000 words to lay out its case, but he was only beginning: according to the structure he laid out, the published text only covered the first sixteenth of the total argument he planned to make. Mercifully, death intervened before he could write any more. Spotting such a colossal white elephant on the battlefield should alert us to the fact that these 'arguments' were not seriously intended to clinch a victory. These were not opinions which had actually changed anyone's minds. Most of these arguments were throwaway debating points, or auxiliary rationalisations used to bolster convictions they had actually reached by other means.

And indeed, arguing against doubt was not in fact effective. The abstract thought that there were rational arguments for faith was comforting; the arguments themselves less so. Bunyan's testimony of his struggle with atheism is typical. "Sometimes I have endeavoured to argue against these suggestions ... but alas! I quickly felt, when I thus did, such arguing's ... would return again upon me." Anyone can argue the toss with temptation. Few of us can reason it into silence. Wiser heads knew that those tempted to unbelief "grow sicker by seeing the medicine", and there is, indeed, a fair amount of testimony that reading arguments against atheism could actually disturb people's faith rather than settle it.

Veterans of the battle with this temptation agreed that, since unbelief is irrational, there is little use in bombarding it with rational arguments. Anyway, arguing with someone as quick-witted as the Devil is a fool's game. Better to change the subject, persist in the faith, and wait for God to bring the storm to an end. The Biblical exemplar here is Doubting Thomas, who doubted, but continued faithfully to keep company with the other apostles until his doubts were brought to an end. As one radical preacher put it:

> "The way to be warm, is not only to ask for a fire, or whether there be a fire or no, or to ... wish for a greater; but to stand close to that fire there is, and to gather heat."

The idea was to treat broken faith like a broken limb: set it in a rigid cast of conventional pious practice and hope that it would eventually heal.

Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't. Receiving Holy Communion, for example, could sometimes powerfully strengthen your faith, but not always. In the early 1640s, a young man named Richard Farnworth took his first Communion after weeks of preparation, trembling with terror at his unworthiness and hoping for assurance of grace. Instead…

> "After I had received ... I sat … and waited in expectation in myself, to receive some divine operation, and spiritual change, and to receive assurance of the pardon of sin; but none came in."

As he dwelt on this alarming emptiness, at last "I saw ... that it was not the body and blood of Christ, but a carnal invention". Trying to jump-start your faith by going through the motions could end up simply draining away whatever life remained in it.

The most powerful weapons against temptation to unbelief were neither trite rationalisations nor these techniques of self-manipulation, but 'arguments' which combined logical force and emotional punch. The two key responses were summed up by John Milton: 'God has imprinted so many clear signs of himself in the human mind, and so many traces of himself throughout all nature, that no sane person can be unaware of God's existence.' Beneath all the throwaway debating points, these were the truly weighty convictions, which storm-tossed believers could use as ballast to bring themselves back to an even keel.

To take Milton's second point first: the appeal to nature and the created order was a classic rational argument for the existence of God, but it was more than just that. It was intellectually compelling – indeed, in this period almost unanswerable – but what made it so powerful was that it seemed intuitively as well as logically true. As one anti-atheist asked in 1634: "What man is there, that beholding the frame of this world, may not perceive that there is a God?" Another anonymous woman who reported a wrenching period of temptation and doubt recalled how she rose early one morning and "went up into the highest room that was in the house". She was sorely tempted to leap to her death, and she "looked forth at the window to see if I could see God". She did not, of course. But instead "I beheld the trees to grow, the birds to fly, the Heavens how they were hanged, and all things that were before me; then I thought they could not make themselves." For her, it was a turning-point. Of course, the existence of trees, birds and stars was not news to her. What was new was the emotional impact of their intricate majesty, at that moment of raw vulnerability. Another girl tempted to atheism tells us that "the Lord was pleased to obviate that temptation by my meditating on the Creation", and especially on the flowers which her father cultivated, in which she beheld 'God's curious workmanship'. The mood is calmer, but the sense of awe, here intertwined with her love for her father, is the same. What began as logic could end as worship.

Thomas Traherne's meditations describe how, from his infancy, the wonder of Creation had both enraptured him and filled him with eager curiosity. As a small boy, "my Soul ... would be carried away to the ends of the Earth: and my thoughts would be deeply engaged with enquiries". The 'ends of the Earth' was not a figure of speech: the problem vexed him. Was there a wall surrounding the edge of the world, or a cliff? Did heaven come down to touch it "so near, that a man with difficulty could creep under"? And what was beneath the world: pillars, or dark waters? If so, what was beneath them? He knew that none of his guesses were adequate, but he could not puzzle it out. At last, someone told him the answer, and its simplicity and beauty surpassed any of his speculations. "Little did I think that the Earth was round." That moment of astonished discovery has been shared by generations of children, but if we are to believe him, the young Traherne was a little more unusual in drawing a theological lesson. When he understood the truth,

> "I knew by the perfection of the work there was a God, and was satisfied, and rejoiced. People underneath, and fields and flowers, with another Sun and another day, pleased me mightily: but more when I knew it was the same Sun that served them by night, that served us by day."

In the modern age, the majesty and strangeness of the cosmos still has a powerful emotional tug, but that tug has usually been towards atheism rather than towards God. Neither emotional reaction is 'correct', of course. Traherne simply reminds us how different the same facts can appear to different eyes.

One the most thoughtful meditations on the natural world's role in the dance between belief and unbelief is found in a 1625 treatise by a minister named Thomas Jackson. He agreed that the natural world refuted atheism less by persuading the mind than by refreshing the soul with 'the pleasant spectacle' of 'woods and shady fountains'. He even suggested that atheism might be seasonal, since "our apprehensions of the true God as Creator, have a kind of spring, when he renews the face of the earth". I don't know how we could test that claim, but the idea isn't ridiculous. His point is that unbelief was not rational scepticism, but what he called 'a spiritual madness', a kind of melancholy. Jackson believed that doubts would be settled not by philosophical disputation, but by turning unbelievers' attention to their own hearts, so that they "might behold the image of God engraved in them".

In other words, Milton's appeal to the witness of nature in the end brings us back to his first and most fundamental point: that the human mind itself testifies to God. At the root of everything was the appeal to inward experience. This recurs throughout every discussion of the subject. "It is engraved in all hearts, that there is a deity." "God is to be felt ... in every man's conscience." "The being and attributes of God were so clear to me, that he was to my intellect what the sun is to my eye." If you dig deep enough into every argument that anxious believers used to persuade themselves back to faith, sooner or later this is what you find: they knew there is a God because they just knew. Like all the most fundamental truths, it is self-evident, and you either see it or you don't. Perhaps you can laboriously construct a proof to demonstrate the fact, but the project is as ridiculous as trying 'to enlighten the Sun with a candle'. If God's being is utterly self-evident, the subject simply cannot be debated. Where would you begin? It is no accident that the analogy of the sun in the sky was so often used. What can you do with people who deny it is there, other than pity their blindness?

From this perspective, it was entirely logical to treat unbelief as a monstrous anomaly. Perhaps, some anti-atheists suggested, our own sins blind us to God, on the principle that moral and intellectual corruption are linked. A more extreme version of the same argument wondered whether atheists are really human. That is more than just abuse. It is a logical solution to the puzzle of how anyone could maintain something so obviously false.

But if you found that you could not see it – if all you could make out above you were dark skies – this was no comfort. The heart of the question is: why, during the seventeenth century, did people who knew all the arguments that there is a God stop finding God's reality intuitively obvious? Why did people who knew that the wind would not disappear under their wings begin to be gripped with an unexpected fear of falling? 'I find,' one fretful puritan wrote in the 1650s, "that the clearest arguments that can be cannot persuade my heart of belief [in] the being of a God, if God do not let the beams of his glory shine into it." So why, in the seventeenth century, did those beams of glory begin to be obscured?

I would trace this back to the anxiety and intensity of Protestant piety, the way it made doubt a part of everyday religion. The despair with which a great many Protestants sometimes wrestled could easily shade into doubt of various kinds, whether because God's mercy seemed too good to be true, or because his justice seemed too terrible to be contemplated. And Protestantism's tendency to start intellectual arguments it had no means of bringing to a decisive end did not help. Debate is, by its nature, open-ended, and the certainty it pursues vanishes over the horizon like a mirage. But the 17th century's emerging crisis of faith was not an intellectual one. The problem of suffering, the most evergreen rational argument against Christianity, does not seem to have had much purchase. And the rational doubts which were cited – whether the Bible is to be trusted, whether religion is a hoax, or whether there really is a God – were nothing new. The Protestant Reformation had not made Christians ask these questions for the first time. Instead, it had taken doubts that had been suffused through the church and distilled them. It mobilised doubt as a weapon and encouraged ordinary believers to do

the same, in the hope that they would make their way through to a reflective and experienced faith rather than a simple and trusting one. But the passage was a dangerous one. Individual believers were compelled to confront their doubts, and to ask on exactly what foundation their long-professed beliefs actually stood. It brought unbelief out into the open: and it did so deliberately, on the principle that you should keep the devil where you can see him.

And so, the implicit doubts that had long pervaded Christendom began to be explicit. The aim was not, of course, to turn believers into unbelievers. It was to turn naive believers into sophisticated, self-aware believers, who had confronted temptation and overcome it. Very often it worked. But becoming a sophisticated believer was neither a simple nor a controllable transformation. The process had costs, and casualties.

And it also had consequences. These doubters, often paralysed by despair and anxiety, may not sound like they were likely to effect very much actual change. But in fact, some of those who faced up to these doubts and managed to rebuild their lives afterwards became the leading challengers the religions of their day as a result. They did not see themselves as atheists: quite the opposite. But in fact, it was these earnest wrestlers with doubt, more than anyone else, who despite themselves laid the foundations for modern unbelief. And that is a story we will pick up in the next lecture.