The Soul of Doubt: the Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx

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Dominic Erdozain is a scholar with a mission: to convince sceptics that religious doubt arises from faith, and more specifically from the religious conscience. It is when faith does not live up to what it promises, argues Erdozain, causing conflict and injustice, that it leads to doubt. To demonstrate his case, he marshals evidence from (amongst others) Luther and Calvin, Thomas Müntzer and Sebastian Franck, Sebastian Castellio and Baruch de Spinoza, Voltaire and Pierre Bayle, Charles Darwin and T. H. Huxley, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. The result is a fascinating study of the ways in which religious faith, and a focus on the moral good in an imperfect world, could open the door to – or indeed drive believers to – doubt, paving the way for approaches which have come to be known as secularist. This is a gripping book, but Erdozain’s close focus on conscience – as opposed to science – as the source of doubt at times leads him to verge on the tendentious. The impact on believers of questions raised by science, and the complexity of the relationship between religious and scientific discourses were much more nuanced than he here acknowledges. If the assumption of a dichotomy between science and theology is too simple an answer to the question of the rise of doubting secular thought, then so too is the assertion that it arose simply from religious conscience. Erdozain’s assertion that ‘assaults on religious orthodoxy are seldom rigorous questions of intellectual plausibility’ (p. 5), seems entirely credible; more problematic is his assertion of the exclusivity of his claim (albeit not the claim itself) that ‘sophisticated philosophical systems can emerge from initially ethical dissent’ (p. 5).
Erdozain begins with Luther, a decision which warrants more space than he chooses to give it. As a recent volume of *Studies in Church History, Doubting Christianity; the Church and Doubt* demonstrates very clearly, doubt emerged long before Luther. Indeed, Robert Swanson argues that ‘doubt and insecurity were much more accepted among the faithful than is usually recognized, and were actually acknowledged as part of the process of attaining faith’. This assertion (from a work which, to be fair, was not available at the time when Erdozain was writing) might have given him pause for thought. What is he suggesting – and what is he ignoring – by beginning his account of doubt with Luther? Is post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment doubt qualitatively different from doubt before Luther – as Erdozain’s chronology seems to be suggesting – and if so, how? The unarticulated implication of his decision is that doubt is a modern phenomenon with early modern roots, and this is clearly not the case. Moreover, to begin with Luther is to claim the Reformation as the beginning of a new, radically different ‘modern’ age; this is a reading which downplays arguments for Luther’s continuity with the theological milieu from which he emerged.

For Erdozain the theology of the younger Luther ‘began with a magnification of the claims of conscience against doctrines of compromise and self-flattery’ (p. 12). This is Erdozain’s reading of the theology of the cross against the theology of glory, and he could cite too Luther’s many references to conscience in the Leipzig disputation. It would be helpful here to have a definition of what conscience meant for Luther, perhaps his assertion at the Heidelberg Disputation (1518) that ‘faith in Christ is a good conscience, as Peter says: “As an appeal to God for a good conscience” [I Pet. 3:21], that means that it thoroughly confides in God’ (LW 31, 67), or his assurance in *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520) that ‘Faith redeems, corrects, and preserves our consciences so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works, although works neither can nor ought to be wanting’ (LW 31, 373). The danger of using the term ‘conscience’ without defining it is that it may appear to assert precisely the equating of ethical, moral goodness and salvific faith which Luther wanted to deny. Luther rejected Aristotle’s identification of moral virtue with theological good, and his equating of freedom of faith with freedom of conscience arguably rewrites the meaning of conscience. The tension in Luther’s thought on this question is seen in his lecture on the Galatians (1535). On the one hand Luther continues to assert that faith brings freedom of (theological) conscience: ‘For Christ has set us free, not for a political freedom or a freedom of the flesh but for a theological or spiritual freedom, that is, to make our conscience free and joyful, unafraid of the wrath to come’ (LW 27, 4). On the other hand, in a passage cited by Erdozain, faith is dependence on God and precisely freedom from conscience: ‘this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive’ (LW 26, 387). Luther here appears to use ‘conscience’ in two different ways, contrasting the conscience freed by the gospel, which is in Christ and can therefore act accordingly, to the conscience bound by the law, which is weighed down by its failings. There are parallels between Luther’s treatment of conscience and his understanding of free will: for Luther the will is ethically free, but theologically bound, so that individuals can make choices about what they do, but these choices cannot help them to attain salvation. Arguably, then, for Luther, the human conscience, like the individual, is *simul iustus et peccator*. Erdozain’s opening chapter would have benefitted from a much more nuanced discussion of the ways in which Luther understands and uses the term ‘conscience’.

The danger of Erdozain’s starting point, then, is that he imposes an oversimplified understanding of conscience onto what he appropriately terms Luther’s ‘paradox of a subjective authoritarianism’ (p. 21). However, Erdozain’s larger point – that Luther moved from a conviction that faith could not and should not be coerced, to the implementation of a system of visitations in Saxony that required church attendance – does ring true, and there can be no doubt that Luther’s blithe assurance that Christian freedom was available to all raised hopes which he later dashed. The responses of Thomas Müntzer and other radicals to what they viewed as the failures of Luther (and indeed of Zwingli, a figure whom Erdozain does not discuss) to remain true to the consequences of the ‘evangelical’ theology led to the articulation of a theology rooted in ‘the idea that conscience was the voice of God in the soul’ (p. 35). Here too the emphasis on individual conscience, although illuminating, is too simple: radicalism evolves out of complex interactions between understandings.
of personal and communal authority, articulated particularly in the struggles to produce definitive readings of Scripture. Erdozain then turns to Sebastian Franck, whose struggles with Lutheran orthodoxy, Erdozain suggests, brought him to teach a rational faith, rooted in a ‘mystical conscience [which] glowed with icy radiance’ (p. 47). Erdozain sees parallels with the conflict over the legitimacy of religious persecution which erupted between Sebastian Castellio and Calvin in the wake of the execution of Michael Servetus. Dismayed by the use of Scripture to defend this execution, Castellio developed ‘a fluid theology of love and duty’ which ‘seemed to equate the work of the spirit with the activity of reason in the conscience’ (pp. 64–5). In their focus on rational faith rooted in moral conscience, the thought of Franck, Castellio and other ‘rational Spiritualists’, Erdozain asserts, ‘did not anticipate the Enlightenment; it made it happen’ (p. 34).

In Erdozain’s view, rejections of Calvin’s theology, and particularly of the doctrine of predestination, were key to this development. Turning to the thought of Baruch de Spinoza, in one of the more controversial chapter of his study, he argues that Spinoza’s writings must be understood in the context of ‘a wider revolt against Calvinism in English and Dutch Protestantism’; Spinoza was ‘not trying to destroy Christian faith: he was trying to rescue it from its historical corruptions’ (p. 71). Erdozain draws parallels between the thought of the English Levellers and Quakers and the Dutch Collegiant Christians, all of whom, he suggests, taught ‘a rationalism developing from, not against, spiritual religion’ (p. 72) which resonates with – and in Erdozain’s reading, informed – Spinoza’s conviction that ‘true salvation’ results ‘when the moral truth of the divine law is perceived inwardly as a natural effect of knowing God’ (p. 110). This, for Erdozain, is a philosophy that ‘sprang from a stance of positive spirituality’ rather than from Spinoza’s scientific interests (p. 116). But is it necessary – indeed, is it for a 17th-century thinker even possible – to make such a clear distinction between the two? Historians of science would suggest not; indeed Peter Harrison has argued persuasively that the rise of science itself, and specifically discussions of the search for knowledge and the intellectual tools needed to get there, are closely entwined with theological interpretations of the results of the Fall and its effects on human nature and reason.(3) Erdozain seems here to be in danger of imposing a much later understanding of the dichotomy between science and religion onto the debates of the 17th century.

Turning to Voltaire, Erdozain acknowledges, however, that it would be inappropriate to suggest competition between ‘moral reason, or conscience’ (here explicitly equated with one another) and ‘intellectual reason, or science’, observing: ‘the claims of science against inherited systems of thought remained ethical and deeply resonant with the revolt of conscience against creed’ (p. 121). At the same time, he argues that ‘the kinship should not be overstated’, and that Locke and Newton, whilst ‘icons of the Enlightenment and the bearers of a new kind of intellectual authority … brought light, not heat, leaving the moral universe much as they found it’ (p. 122). For Erdozain’s argument, the significant figures are Pierre Bayle, whose ‘intellectual scepticism … was married to moral and spiritual conviction, indeed driven by it’ (p. 129), and Voltaire (born François-Marie Arouet) whose writings, Erdozain finds, were ‘even in the supposedly deistic phase … strangely evangelical,’ offering an implicit critique of conscience long before he came to offer an explicit one (p. 149). For Voltaire, as for Castellio, it was persecution – or indeed other injustices, such as slavery – perpetrated in the name of Christianity that raised questions about the legitimacy of Christian teachings. He ‘remained a man of real, if idiosyncratic, piety’, protesting, ‘I have been called an atheist because I said that men weren’t born to destroy each other’ (pp. 170, 169).

The final two chapters move into the 19th century, often characterised as a period of doubt. Here too, Erdozain wants to argue that it is all about conscience: ‘the Victorian crisis of faith … was a fact as well as a myth. It was a time of painful and intense disenchantment, in which the Bible and orthodoxy came under sustained attack, but it was driven by conscience, not science’ (pp. 174–5). And here too, it is this insistence that the roots of doubt must lie either in science or in conscience that weakens his case. He is surely right to emphasise T. H. Huxley’s respect for ‘the moral stamina of the Bible’ (p. 186) and Charles Darwin’s conviction that although ‘life would be poorer without the “morality of the New Testament”, … to believe in the Bible is to believe in everlasting punishment – “And this is a damnable doctrine”’ (pp. 208, 209). Similarly, Feuerbach’s ‘brutal reduction of theology to “anthropology” rests on little more than moral revulsion from the ethical complacency of religion’ (p. 230). In the case of Marxism too, Erdozain’s claim is that ‘[Marx’s] materialism emerged from his moralism’ so that ‘the germ of revolt against religion and
spiritually sanctioned capitalism is unmistakable religious’ (pp. 223, 222). His argument that, as Beatrice Webb put it, ‘with most people it is the sense of what is morally untrue which first shakes your faith in Christianity; it is moral disapprobation of some of its dogmas which forces you to question rationally the rest’ (p. 210) is insightful in exposing the struggles of conscience – here in the sense of natural justice – which led believers to reject their faith. However, as Erdözain himself recognises, ‘the vaunted gulf between scientific and religious “worldviews” did not exist’ (p. 209). These moral dilemmas could, and clearly sometimes did, go hand in hand with a growing sense of tension between scientific explanation and religious teaching, but this surely is not a case of either/or, but of both/and. Once again, Erdözain’s insistence that doubt must be rooted exclusively in conscience seems as overly simplistic as the suggestion that doubt arose from a clash between science and religion.

It is clear from Erdözain’s concluding chapter that his analysis is more nuanced that his argument at times seems. His concern is that the focus on scientific thought as the cause of secularisation reflects on the one hand ‘the urge of secularism to build a narrative of objective, scientific reason triumphing over ignorance and superstition’, and on the other ‘a tendency of theologians and religious communities to look for the causes of alienation outside their own traditions’ (pp. 262–3). But this critique appears to be rooted in a somewhat outdated historiography. Historians of science, including Amos Funkenstein, Peter Harrison and John Hedley Brooke have long been arguing for the theological roots of scientific method. And theologians and church historians have really not been as reluctant to critique the religious traditions on which they work as Erdözain suggests, as (for instance) Susan Schreiner’s Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era, and the range of essays collected in Doubting Christianity clearly show. (4)

This is an attractively produced book, but there are some minor niggles around presentation. Not only has the publisher opted for endnotes, but the book’s layout makes individual notes remarkably difficult to identify: the endnotes are divided into numbered chapters with no chapter headings, whilst the running headers use chapter headings with no chapter number. To trace a note, the reader therefore has to find the beginning of the chapter, check its number, and then find the relevant section of the endnotes. This would be less of an issue if Erdözain did not have an irritating of referencing secondary literature anonymously (‘in one scholar’s phrase’; ‘a Luther specialist’…). Moreover, he is selective in his referencing of primary sources, in many cases citing the scholar who is citing the author, rather than including a reference to the author’s works directly.

These niggles aside, Erdözain’s proposal that although ‘the fiercest religious cultures have produced the fiercest philosophical dissent’ (p. 5), ‘language of secularisation is ultimately … misplaced’ (p. 265) is persuasive. What is less convincing, as this review has suggested, is his exclusivist focus on conscience as the only cause of doubt. Erdözain has made a fascinating contribution to understanding the religious and theological context of the rise of secularism, but conscience too is not the whole story.

Notes

1. Doubting Christianity; the Church and Doubt, ed. Frances Andrews, Charlotte Methuen and Andrew Spicer, Studies in Church History (Cambridge, 2016). Back to (1)
2. Ibid, p.20. Back to (2)
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