

Book Review

Dominic Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 320+xiii pp, \$35.00 Hardcover, ISBN: 0199844615

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In this engaging intellectual history, Dominic Erdozain (Theology, Emory University) seeks to account for European secularization during the modern period. Unlike Hans Blumenberg, and, more recently, Charles Taylor, who tell the story of secularization as a process distinct from religious belief and religious institutions, Erdozain argues that the basis for secularization can be found in the religious ferment of modernity itself, beginning with the Protestant Reformation and extending through the first half of the nineteenth century. The book begins with Martin Luther and his critics, proceeds through discussions of Spinoza and the English Dissenters, Voltaire and the French Enlightenment, and, finally, to Darwin's Victorian religiosity and the German Left Hegelians (Feuerbach and Marx in particular). He does not contest the claim that secularization defines modernity; rather, he seeks to show that the roots of secularization can be found within these modern religious debates themselves. The opposition that defines his various interpretations of the historical debates that shaped intellectual life from the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries is that of love versus faith. Defenders of the faith, whether Lutheran, Calvinist or nineteenth century Evangelist, invariably turn out to be on the side of institutionalized religion, while proponents of love defend individual conscience, tolerance, and dissent in the face of proponents of faith. While Erdozain tells a compelling story, one may wonder whether his tale is too neat and whether it might elide real, messy historical differences in an effort to shape this compelling narrative of love versus faith across the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries. I shall return to this

suspicion in my conclusion of this review.

Erdozain's story begins, as stories of modern secularization often do, with Martin Luther.¹ It provides a dramatic opening to the story, but one can also opt for an earlier starting point—the twelfth century Nominalist controversy, for example, or early Christianity's struggles to overcome Gnosticism.² Erdozain chooses to begin with Luther because he embodies the two main themes of Erdozain's study. The young Luther presents readers with a striking figure of an individual of conscience protesting against a corrupt institution, that of the Catholic Church, but Luther eventually becomes the authoritarian figure that his younger self so despised. In other words, Luther comes to embody the figure of established faith against the individual of conscience. Indeed, his protest against the Church and its sclerotic Scholasticism was founded upon the principle of faith; "faith, not works" became the defining slogan of his protest movement, but this foundation of faith later becomes the basis for persecution of movements that were deemed by Luther to be dangerously unorthodox. "At the very moment that Luther was writing to hostile princes, urging leniency toward persecuted evangelicals, he was instrumental in denying basic freedoms to Anabaptists within what was effectively his own jurisdiction of Prussia, Hesse, and Saxony" (31). Luther's contradiction [...] and one can certainly see echoes of this conflict continue today (though this is not Erdozain's focus, of course).

Luther's evangelism provides the leitmotif of Erdozain's book, for what was once thought to simply be

a process of secularism that led eventually, via various way stations such as Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment, to the modern world of unbelief, turns out to be a much more complicated story. Erdozain interprets the process of secularization as a series of reactions that initially sought to replace fear with love and sin with tolerance. Dissent manifested itself in various ways, though Erdozain's interpretation is most convincing when applied to early modern sources. As we shall see, his attempts to shoehorn even nineteenth century thinkers such as Charles Darwin and Karl Marx into this interpretive framework are less effective.

Chapter Two begins with a discussion of Thomas Müntzer's critique of Luther's attempts to attain secular power as a betrayal of his theology and continues with an account of Calvin's Christian commonwealth of Geneva, a place "where providence and politics meet" (48). Calvin's harsh theology of predestination was mirrored in the firm hand by which he governed his commonwealth. Brooking no dissent, he ordered the Spanish dissenter Servetus burned at the stake in 1553. Servetus was fleeing persecution in Spain and it is not altogether clear why he thought he would be welcomed in Geneva (51-53). While there were various responses to Servetus' execution, Erdozain focuses on a former associate of Calvin's, Castellio, who condemned Servetus' execution as the triumph of narrow-minded orthodoxy over Christian mercy: love betrayed by fear.

The third chapter focuses on Spinoza, another harsh critic of Calvin and Calvinism. Erdozain argues that Spinoza's work on politics and toleration were largely influenced by a community of Christian dissenters. The Collegiants were a group founded in 1619 in the Dutch provinces who reacted against the harsh Calvinism that had prevailed since the victory of the United Provinces over the Habsburgs in 1579 (72). The Collegiants were a community of faith without creed or clergy, similar in many ways to the Quakers in England, that met monthly in groups called colleges. Erdozain's claim is that this group, with whom Spinoza met monthly while writing his key works including *The Ethics*, was a key influence upon his philosophical views. Unlike scholars who distinguish between Spinoza's philosophical circle and his religious one, Erdozain argues that the two groups shared many of the

same doctrines, including that of the Christian Logos as an "inner light" of reason at the heart of Spinoza's ethics.

But Spinoza's thought had little positive impact among intellectuals until the nineteenth century. In many ways, Pierre Bayle continued his project of developing a religious conscience shorn of superstition and the desire for political power, although Erdozain focuses on Voltaire in the fourth chapter of his study. Voltaire's humanism is Christian in spirit, for it advocates an active conscience in favor of tolerance pitted against the traditional arbitrary authorities of old. Voltaire's critique, too, amounts to an immanent critique of Christianity that relies upon the original spirit of Christianity to question what it had become (165).

In a somewhat abrupt shift, chapter five turns to Victorian England and the debates over evolution. Here, too, Erdozain detects a different fault line dividing the combatants than today's familiar controversies between faith and science. The nineteenth century scientific revolution has a distinctly Christian flavor. Even "Darwin's bulldog," T.H. Huxley, was driven by a "form of religious anticlericalism" that was not opposed to religion entirely but rather the institutionalized religious authority of the Anglican Church. Darwin and Huxley were part of a larger movement that critiqued what was seen as the soullessness of both modern Positivism as well as the Church. They sought to replace these dead doctrines with a new kind of religious faith in the awesomeness of nature in her myriad vitality. "Wallace's determination to combine evolution with a spiritual outlook was typical of the era, and his willingness to interpret nature's struggle as a stimulus to 'sentiments of justice, mercy, charity, and love, which we all feel to be our best and noblest characteristics' recalled the evangelical appropriation of Malthus in the 1820s. Nature was at war, but humans have the capacity to rise above it" (205). The chapter concludes with a discussion of George Eliot, making the case for her unbelief as "the classic revolt of conscience against creed" (212). It was motivated by the same critiques of the established church that had animated her predecessors during the previous three centuries.

The final chapter remains in the nineteenth century, but the focus shifts to the Continent once more. The focus here is on Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians,

culminating in a consideration of Marx's criticism as motivated, much like Eliot's, by a sense of conscience that borrowed its terms from past religious dissent. Feuerbach mounts an anthropological critique of religion that reduces religious belief to anthropomorphic idolatry. According to Feuerbach, religious faith masks a hidden egoism that Feuerbach's critique will lay bare (229). Providence provides the final nail in the coffin of his scathing critique, for it justifies the rule of a religious elect that would otherwise have to justify their ecclesiastical authority through their own words and deeds. These critical insights provide the basis for Marx's ideological critique of religion (230-233).

Erdozain argues that Marx's religious critique is at the heart of his political economy. If egoism can be shown to be at the heart of religious belief, then it would be a relatively simple task to transfer this critique to free market pieties as well. "Religion had been exposed as the cipher of self-interest. It only remained to apply the same principle to the capricious deity of the free market and the silver-tongued chimera of democracy" (247). Marx adopts his "prophetic idiom" in the service of a "ruthless" critique rooted in religious critique that expands to apply, as he writes in an early text, to "everything existing." Indeed, one of the key slogans of Communism, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," has been traced to the New Testament Acts of the Apostles (260).

The book is not without its flaws. As I alluded to previously, I believe the biggest problem is that it replaces the grand narrative of secularization as the basis of modernity with one of immanent critique. As with any grand narrative, one suspects that the story is much more complex. For example, in his mammoth project of intellectual history, Jonathan Israel distinguishes between a moderate Enlightenment and a radical Enlightenment indebted to Spinoza.³ One wonders how Erdozain's tale fits with Israel's, who is only mentioned briefly in Erdozain's book. One also wonders how figures such as Nietzsche and Hegel, who each only have bit parts in Erdozain's story, figure into it. Nevertheless, Erdozain's book accomplishes what good intellectual history should: it forces us to reconsider positions we had been taught to think were obvious.

Endnote

[1] Often, though not always. Hans Blumenberg, for example, in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) proceeds, like Erdozain, to contest the framing of the secularization hypothesis as it was originally formulated by Karl Löwith, who posits a radical break between modernity and the Middle Ages and calls this radical break 'secularization'. Blumenberg rejects Löwith's analysis and replaces it with an account of modernity as an attempt to ward off Gnosticism. Erdozain follows Charles Taylor in pinning the roots of secularization in the Reformation, though Taylor's account finds the basis for secularization in modern unbelief rather than religious belief.

[2] In addition to Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), esp. the Epilogue, "Gnosticism, Nihilism, and Existentialism," pp. 320-341.

[3] A concise single volume summary of the larger project, contrasting a political vision of radical equality indebted to figures such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Bayle against the more moderate Enlightenment vision of characterized by the Scottish thinkers Adam Ferguson and David Hume, can be found in Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).