

***Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt.* By Alec Ryrie.**  
Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019.  
viii + 262 pp. \$27.00 hardcover

This book is a kind of jailbreak. It rejects not only previous scholarly work on the subject of unbelief, but also the stubborn assumptions that have shaped and organized it. The short version of that previous edifice is that atheism, in order to matter in Western history, had to resolve itself into a coherent and rigorous intellectual program. Before the mid-seventeenth century (read: Spinoza), atheism was unimportant because it was incoherent and irrational, a series of inchoate attacks that could never have dented the sophisticated arguments of great Christian thinkers like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. Ryrie's brilliance is to more or less unceremoniously dump this narrative in the bin, not because it is wrong but because it is irrelevant. In the real world, people do not lose their belief as a result of careful reasoning. Rather, unbelief is emotional. People are surprised to find themselves doubting, but doubt they do, so they experience that doubt as sadness or exhilaration, terror or longing. Thus, Ryrie argues, the history of unbelief is a history of emotion—particularly anger and anxiety—not a history of the construction of anti-doctrines which challenge in mirror-reverse the doctrines of religion.

Some readers may be turned off by Ryrie's framing of this argument as an attack on intellectual history, writing: "We do not need an intellectual or philosophical history of atheism: we need an emotional history" (5). "People who read and write books, like you and me, have a persistent tendency to overestimate the power of ideas," he adds (5). But I would urge skeptical readers to push past these polemical claims, because they are not really what the book is about. Indeed, ironically, Ryrie's book *is* an intellectual history of sorts, largely populated by writers and philosophers, including many you might expect, from Montaigne and Machiavelli to Paine and Dostoyevsky. The difference comes in what Ryrie expects from those thinkers. While a traditional history of ideas might stage a series of intellectual moves in order to watch atheism harden and grow, from Ryrie's perspective a partial or half-baked atheism is no less historically important than a more complete one. After all, a bitter denunciation of Christianity as a scam to part fools from their money is more effective at moving people's hearts to doubt than the most sophisticated ideas in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. Ryrie's thesis is thus that religious doubt has been far more pervasive and meaningful for far longer in European history than scholars searching for intellectual coherence have been willing to admit. Already in the Middle Ages, and very deeply after the Reformation's inbuilt skepticism of the Christian tradition, unbelief—generally experienced either as anger at the church, or as anxiety about one's own condition—was *normal*. The subsequent history of modern atheism must be rewritten as a process of finding or building new spaces where that perennial unbelief could dwell.

This is a powerful and elegant book, with more than a little genius in it, which I encourage all historians of Christianity to read. Indeed, I feel a little awkward offering any criticisms at all, for two reasons. First, reflecting its own argument, *Unbelievers* is, by design, a relatively light and emotive essay rather than a watertight intellectual tome; picking scholarly nits with it hardly seems fair. Second, Ryrie fulsomely and generously acknowledges my own work as an intellectual catalyst for his book, so challenging him

would be not only churlish but self-defeating. However, I do want to pick up just a couple of issues in my appointed role as a scholarly reviewer.

First, even though Ryrie's title uses the words "unbelievers" and "doubt," in the text readers will find other terms used more or less interchangeably: atheism, skepticism, deism, pantheism, and so forth. This sometimes gives the impression that there is no meaningful difference between doubting Christian orthodoxy and denying the existence of divinity. It often gives the impression that a wide array of historical actors can be lumped together as fellow-travelers on the atheist road. These are debatable propositions. And while I look forward to debating them, I do fear that Ryrie's use of the term "atheism" in particular is going to make that debate less productive than it would have been otherwise. Part of Ryrie's point is that "atheism" in its formal sense is not really that important alongside the emotional history of doubt; so using the word "atheism" may muddy the waters and give undue attention to the ultimately uninteresting question of "real" atheism.

Second, I wish there had been more history of the emotions in this emotional history of doubt. The history of the emotions is a robust field devoted to historicizing the way people feel, both the contexts in which emotions occurred and the content of the emotions themselves. If, as Ryrie says, unbelief was primarily an emotional enterprise, then a serious account of emotional changes over time would be crucial to understanding the history of doubt. How did anger at the church evolve into triumphant self-righteousness? When was it appropriate to laugh at the absurdity of religion, and when was it appropriate to cry? Might the well-attested vogue for outward displays of emotion in Europe's eighteenth century have contributed to Enlightenment unbelief? Or, conversely, might the well-attested suppression of feeling in modern Britain have helped to sustain belief? A longer version of *Unbelievers*, less accessible to the general public, might have explored these issues. And while I cannot fault Ryrie for choosing to write a book that people actually read, I hope his choice does not prevent him or someone else from exploring these issues in the future.

So there: I have fulfilled my duty to find fault. But every single person reading these words—anyone who reads academic reviews in *Church History*—should immediately go out and read Alec Ryrie's *Unbelievers*. It will change your view of one of the central issues of modern European history.

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***The Oxford Handbook of Presbyterianism.* Edited by Gary Scott Smith and P. C. Kemeny. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xi + 623 pp. \$150.00 cloth.**

The editors of this book, Gary Scott Smith and P. C. Kemeny, concede in their introduction that generating interest in denominational history is an uphill battle. Roughly twenty-five years ago, Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey tried to revive interest in studies of Protestant communions in a collection of essays, *Reimagining Denominationalism* (Oxford University Press, 1994). That was a laudable effort at a