

CHAPTER 11

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH TRADITIONS

DID atheism exist in the Middle Ages? While this question is not easy to answer in one sentence, it is clear that the Middle Ages were, in many ways, one of the decisive periods in the history of atheism and therefore deserve attention. This statement may seem surprising, and certainly it contradicts popular assumptions about the Middle Ages as a dark and irrational period, and atheism as a result of rational reasoning. For that reason the present overview will start with an outline of the dominant popular assumptions as well as the research traditions, before presenting the results of empirical investigations.

On the one hand, it is very common to presume that inquisitors or religious elites in general persecuted atheism during the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the Middle Ages are thought to have been unable to even conceptualize the idea that there is no God. The period is often described as an age of faith, during which the doubts and the rational critique against theological propositions that spread in the Modern Era were unknown. These two assumptions are mutually exclusive and indicate that the study of medieval atheism is a field of controversies and many open questions and also, as will be shown here, of popular myths.

Both these theories—the persecution theory and the romantic Age of Faith—go back to traditions emerging in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe, at that time deeply involved in denominational conflicts. Within these struggles the idea gained ground that advanced thinkers had always seen through the machinations of the clergy, who in turn had continuously tried to suppress the truth. Some medieval individuals were named as examples, mostly well known personalities. They were taken from lists of medieval heretics, which were first compiled by Protestants and Catholics in order to provide historical examples for their own respective positions. Many names gathered in these corpora were inherited by the modern scholarly debate on atheism. Western scholars also sought affirmation from outside Europe for their opposition towards the established Western Churches. They found them in Eastern writings and gathered

names from Arabic polemical literature as examples for early Muslim atheists. During the nineteenth century the thesis gained ground that Muslim philosophy was even instrumental for the emergence of enlightenment and atheism in Europe.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the European debate on atheism reached one of its first peaks. Hermann Reuter, John Robertson, and Fritz Mauthner wrote the first comprehensive histories of atheism. They summarized the examples and polemical sources and handed them down to scholars in the twentieth century, who were to become deeply influenced by their works (Reuter 1875–1877; Robertson 1899; Mauthner [1920–30] 1985). The category ‘atheism’ they used (or ‘enlightenment’, which appeared as a synonym in their studies) was very broad. They defined atheism, enlightenment, scientific and scholastic thinking, heresy, criticism of the church and free thought as part of the same opposing movement against religion.

The seminal works just quoted were historical studies, but they were not written by professional historians. Rather, the scholarly field was dominated by the theologians, philosophers, and philologists. These disciplines shaped the definitions of atheism, the choice of sources as well as the methods of the research tradition: individual writers and their thoughts remained in the focus. During the twentieth century many writings of both Arabic and Latin thinkers were edited and studied.

One important research result of this research made revisions inevitable and caused controversies to the present. A close look revealed that many of the assumed early heroes of atheism were much less radical than previously expected. None of those named before could be proven to have themselves denied the existence of a God.

At the same time, historical studies (e.g., Thomas 1950; Murray 1986; Goodich 1988; Arnold 2005) showed that medieval societies were far less in line with official dogmas than earlier generations had imagined. While historians of the Middle Ages had largely abstained from taking part in the debates on atheism, they had intensively investigated medieval spiritual life in its concrete forms.

On the basis of this research it makes theoretical and empirical sense to presuppose the existence of doubts about religious propositions, ignorance, disinterest, and the absence of belief in the medieval world, both Muslim and Latin Christian. Yet, the actual forms and extent of this phenomenon, and its relation to modern atheism, remain highly controversial even among those who generally favour this position. What is more, the overall scarcity of medieval sources and especially the lack of so called ego-documents, autobiographical writings, and other documents produced by the people themselves testifying to their personal convictions, make general statements of any kind highly speculative.

Early experiments to include Jewish influences on medieval Latin philosophy have not been followed up in recent years and there is generally less interest in atheism among Jews in the Middle Ages. This is also true for Orthodox and ancient Oriental Churches. Both Jews and Eastern Christians were not included in the European discourses sketched above and thus have remained in the shadow. The state of research is therefore very unbalanced within the different fields of medieval studies.

CHALLENGES TO INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGIONS

The age before 1500 was a period of religious dynamics and diversity. Even the beliefs of those who tried to be more or less in line with the approved teachings were neither simple nor uniform. Because of the overwhelming majority of illiterates there was also sheer ignorance, which led to propositions different from orthodox theology. Where some teachings and snippets of texts were known through oral transmission, they contradicted experiences of everyday life. Men and women knew about practical processes of procreation, life and death, production processes of food, necessities of commerce, social realities, and other everyday concerns (Arnold 2010). Virgin birth, resurrection, incarnation, transubstantiation, and other teachings were not congruent with these experiences. Even the philosophically trained thinkers, clerics as well as philosophers, had their doubts about the incarnation. Common sense as well as philosophy struggled with speculative teachings like the *creatio ex nihilo*. While the forms of opposition against the main religions differed dramatically between the Arabic and the Latin world, they both faced a simple truth: not a single theological teaching, be it Jewish, Muslim, or Christian (or pagan, for that matter), was left unquestioned either by polemics from outside, by opposing groups from inside, or even by those who, with the best of intentions, could not help not to be convinced.

In two main waves of heated inter- and intra-religious controversies the main arguments against Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teachings were developed and spread. The first wave swept over Western and Central Asia during the first centuries of Muslim rule. It was set in motion by the polemical debates between the religions and the philosophical circles (see Ess 1991–1997). The second wave included twelfth to fourteenth-century Europe. At that time Europe received translations from classical philosophy and Arabic learning. In the emerging schools and universities these texts were discussed eagerly, though not as radically as in the early Muslim world. Still, some masters in the Latin universities and Byzantine scholars developed their own views on theology, the cosmos, creation, the stars, life and death, or anthropology, which differed from orthodox Christian doctrine. In the West, like in the East, religious movements and sects additionally challenged the institutionalized religions. To answer these challenges, apologetic tracts were written.

Some of the objections made by medieval contemporaries have been interpreted as signs of atheism (e.g., the theory of the eternity of the world, mortality of the soul, invalidity of prophethood, faked sacred texts). While this might sometimes be the case—an example will be given later—these elements alone cannot serve as a positive proof. For what might be a cornerstone of atheism in the modern world could be part of an individual way to believe in the Middle Ages. For example, the so-called 'Ortlieber', a religious sect, believed in the eternity of the world (Föbel 1993). The outspoken church

critic Thomas Müntzer (1489–1525) rejected the divine revelation of the Bible, but was nonetheless deeply religious. Medieval religious discourses were in some respect more diverse than modern ones.

Therefore, an unequivocal context for certain propositions is needed in order to decide on their philosophical motivation. In this respect, one missing element is most striking: none of the medieval polemics ever actively denied the existence of God or even claimed an agnostic position for a given author. As a case in point, Burzōē the Persian in the sixth century, after having failed to find criteria to decide which of the bickering theologians defended the best religious system, did indeed turn away from them all. Contrary to modern interpretations, however, he did not renounce faith in God. Instead, he continued his own individual ways to care for the afterlife of his soul by pleasing God as best he could (Burzōē the Persian [500s] 1912).

LAWS, HERESIOGRAPHY, AND THE ALLEGED PERSECUTION OF ATHEISTS

The sheer lack of unequivocal sources is often explained by the assumption that atheists were afraid to expose their ideas. Thus, a closer look at legal conceptions and persecutions in the Middle Ages is in order. Medieval societies were deeply concerned with maintaining the ever-fragile order and internal peace. Personal loyalty or rather faithfulness to God and man was the building block of society. Personal convictions, on the other hand, were not. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders demanded personal acceptance of basic religious propositions by lay people. Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767 CE), an important Muslim theologian, held that to be called a 'believer' a Muslim needed to assent to the teaching of the one-ness of God and the prophethood of Mohammed (on the concepts of believer/unbeliever, see Griffel 2000). Sa'adyā Gaon (882–942), an influential Jewish sage, demanded that individuals should adhere to Judaism with knowledge and active understanding (Sa'adyā Gaon [933] 1989). The Fourth Lateran Council in the year 1215 demanded that Christians should firmly believe in the basic Credo of the church.

After all, however, these convictions were an individual soteriological problem. Faith, on the other hand, was also a crucial legal and social category. The conception comprised commitment and trust. Thus, those who were designated as 'unbelievers' in medieval thinking were not primarily thought of as individuals who were not personally convinced of the existence of God. Rather, this term signified members of other religions, enemies outside of one's own secular system of loyalty or rebels from the inside. The English terms 'infidels', 'infidelity' and 'faithlessness' still show traces of this understanding.

Any good Muslim or an acknowledged authority traditionally had and still has the right to *takfir*, to declare a Muslim opponent as an 'unbeliever' in front of the community,

which has serious consequences for the accused. Yet, in the past atheists were not the target of this accusation—at least, there is no proof that they ever were. Only today this indictment can be shown to threaten atheists. Apostasy as defection was systematically dealt with in Muslim and Late Antique Christian law and harshly punished. In medieval Christianity the notion of heresy was more important. Judaism developed more allowing legal constructions. A Jewish apostate was perhaps counted as a bad Jew, but he or she remained Jewish. Neither of these legal practices defined apostasy as a synonym of atheism (Slaughter 1993; Cohen 1999).

Medieval religious thinkers of the different religions also developed conceptions of religious unorthodoxy, which implied in their eyes disloyal, immoral, or even rebellious behaviour. They defined certain rulings which led to the excommunication of such errant members or even to their secular punishment. Concerning atheism the Muslim-Arabic world and the Latin world differed in their concepts of deviance. Muslim heresiography (Ess 2011) contains terms like *mulhid* (lit. deviator), *zindiq* (lit. Manichean) or *dahri* (lit. believer in fate and the eternity of the world; see Samuli Schielke's 'The Islamic World'). These notions designate a wider range of teachings and actions a writer deemed as aberrant, and they are not synonymous with atheism. *Dahri*, for example, could be used in a polemical way against Christians. Christianity could even be called the worst *dahriyya* of all (Tannous 2010: 536). Yet, atheism could clearly be one intended understanding of these conceptions in the heresiographical literature (Chokr 1993; Ess 2011; Crone 2012). On the other hand, all of the known individuals designated with these terms, as well as all of those actually brought before court and punished, can be shown to have been believing in some God or gods (Stroumsa 1999). One important example is the notorious critic of Islam, Ibn al-Rawandi (c.827–864/911). Jewish heresiographers used some of the Arabic terms already mentioned (like *dahri*) as well as the ominous notion 'Epicureans' to designate deviant groups. This word appears in the Talmud. Friedrich Niewöhner has suggested that the term included the idea of atheism (Niewöhner 1999). This supposition is not undisputed and no individual was ever identified to be an atheist.

In the Latin world, an ever increasing number of teachings and actions since the eleventh century were judged as heresy. The debate on the mortality of the soul occupied the public and the inquisitorial tribunals in the Late Middle Ages alike (e.g. Murray 1986). At that time lawlessness and a libertine lifestyle were also conceptualized as 'Epicureanism'. Similar to the Jewish sources 'Epicureans' were said to deny the punishment of the soul in the hereafter. Therefore they seemed not to have a reason to abide by the law. Vice versa, immoral individuals were called 'Epicureans' because of their actions, regardless of their personal attitudes. As perpetrators often had no secular enforcement to fear and because of the resulting general lack of social peace, 'Epicureans' seemed to be existing in great numbers, especially in Italy. In the inquisitorial protocols, however, contemporaries who deny the immortality of the soul, can only very rarely be identified (Murray 1984).

Numerous inquisitorial protocols reveal a wealth of unorthodox and radical beliefs. Yet, among the suspects tried before court by the inquisitor Bernard Gui (1261/2–1331)

only perhaps one peasant in 900 seems to have been an atheist (Given 1997). What is more, the peasant in question and a small number of others were punished for rival teachings, not for atheism. The sheer absence of belief in the existence of a God was never defined as a heresy. As the inquisitorial and heresiological writings aimed to be comprehensive, this absence must be intentional.

In medieval Islam, blasphemy against the prophet and his companions by Muslims or non-Muslims was conceptualized as rebellious behaviour. Blasphemy could be processed by a court and punished by death (Slaughter 1993; Wiederhold 1997). This was also the case in Latin Christianity from the thirteenth century. Although in modern days medieval blasphemy has often been seen as a sign of medieval atheism, this inference is not confirmed by empirical research on court protocols (Schwerhoff 2005). During the Latin Middle Ages blasphemy was understood as a hostile speech act against God, which could threaten the relation between him and his community on earth. In the centuries after 1500 legislation against blasphemy seems indeed to have been directed against atheists, but for the Middle Ages proofs are lacking.

Religious doubt as a problem of religious law has been little studied. Religious sceptics in a philosophical sense are again featured in Arabic Muslim heresiography (Turki 1979; Ess 1991–1997). They are generally subsumed among one of the heretical categories mentioned above, regardless of the personal belief they might have had. In Latin Christianity indications of religious scepticism of the philosophical kind are not extant. Neither scepticism nor spiritual doubts were featured in canon or criminal law. The famous norm '*Dubius in fide infidelis est . . .*' from the decretals by Pope Gregory IX (*Corpus Iuris Canonici*, vii, 1) has often been misinterpreted. *Dubius* is not the medieval term for a sceptic, but for unreliable humans or things (like roads or relationships). The sentence is best understood in the context of the persecution of heretics. The decretal refers to an unreliable witness in court, when heretics are questioned, because the witness has a tendency to heresy. Inquisitorial manuals as well as ecclesiastical and criminal law also show that doubt was never defined a crime.

The persecution of religious deviances was in any case restricted to certain areas, religious trends or jurisdictions—the Abbasid caliphate, the Roman church—and depended on aims, means and ends to carry out persecutions of certain propositions or groups. Jewish communities in the Middle Ages had neither the means nor the strategies to persecute religious deviance violently. Christian minorities in Muslim countries also refrained from systematic persecution of their heretics as it would only have given a pretext for external harassment by secular powers.

The results of one hundred years of modern study of religious persecutions were and are very useful for the history of atheism. The scarcity of positive witnesses for medieval atheism can today no longer be explained by persecution. There is ample proof for deviant propositions which were defended with conviction. Thus a dominant trope of modern literature on atheism, the assumption that medieval atheists did not speak out for fear, can now best be explained by the internal dynamics of the modern atheism discourse mentioned above.

SECULAR LITERATURE

Some of the examples for allegedly unbelieving individuals go back to secular literature like chronicles, sagas, songs, poems and parodies of the Latin Christian world. Since the early Middle Ages stories were told about extremely impious contemporaries, who mocked faith in God in the strongest terms (Prinz 1989). Tales about impious kings and nobles, about simple villagers and fools and, last but not least, about the clergy itself, entertained the public. Some of these accounts were transculturally spread by attaching them to new personages. These texts are often critical of the secular and religious hierarchy and are part of the contemporary discourses on political power and the state of the church. Parodies and comical dialogues clearly serve to amuse, even in a sometimes daring manner. Monastic and pious life did not exclude rude jokes.

While there is every reason to assume that some mighty lords were not very pious, the source value of the narrations is limited because of these critical tendencies. Also the wording is misleading. Philological studies show that the very phrase 'to deny God' or 'not to believe in God' had a wider meaning in the Middle Ages, comprising 'to abnegate, to defect' or 'not to trust'. The texts on seeming non-believers therefore include a wider range of deviant and disloyal behaviour than the wording suggests. As an example a wilful French knight shall be mentioned, who mutilated two other knights and betrayed their trust in him. Because of this action he is called a cruel enemy of the faith who negates and abjures God and the faith (*Vaux-de-Cerney*, 128–32), again regardless of his personal religious convictions. This phrase refers to the Biblical Psalm 14 'the fool says in his heart that there is no God', which mentions a tyrannical person, who does not care for the needs of the weak. Read in the context the fool of the Psalms clearly affirms the existence of a God, but he does not care about his commandments. Thus, the sentence 'he says in his heart that there is no God' was often connected with irresponsible and immoral individuals in order to criticize them, even if the narrator clearly knew that the person in question believed in a God (Weltecke 2010: 261).

In secular literature there are also stories narrated about individuals, often about noble men, who were severely tormented by religious doubts. They served as examples of bad human fate and must be interpreted within the context of the respective works where they appear. More of these examples are gathered in spiritual literature, discussed further on.

THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE AND THE CASE OF THE PROOFS

The first medieval thinkers to probe the idea that there is no God were philosophers during the period of the formation of Muslim speculative theology (eighth to tenth

centuries). They, for example, recorded disputations between a Muslim and various religious opponents. Some of these adversaries allegedly came forward with the confession that they did not believe in the existence of a God (Chokr 1993: 111ff.; Daiber 1999), often to be convinced of the contrary by the victorious Muslim in the course of the debate. Heresiographers systematically described the propositions of various deviant groups, among them again groups of people who denied that there existed anything outside the tangible world. These groups are sometimes also referred to as ancient philosophers and in general remain rather oblique (Ibn Warrāq in McDermott 1984). The Muslim writers interpreted these propositions not only as aberrant thoughts, but also in ethical terms: they saw them as arrogant philosophy, as moral deficiency, anarchy or madness and folly. The Jewish sage Sa'adyā Gaon also referred to those who did not believe in the existence of God as ignorants or libertines driven by their desires (Sa'adyā Gaon [933] 1989: 33; Stroumsa 1999: 140). These judgements later also reappear in the Latin world, where the interpretation of atheism as foolishness dominated.

Muslim theological writings of different genres often contained a proof of the existence of God. Muslim and Jewish thinkers also gathered philosophical reasons for the contrary. They then set out to refute these arguments. These demonstrations are often placed at the beginning of their comprehensive works of speculative theology as will be the case later in the Latin world.

There is an on-going controversy among scholars of Islam on the relation between these passages, the adversaries they mention, and the social reality of the time. Crone argues that these works confirm the existence of atheism (2012). Stroumsa stresses the observation that no individual was shown to have held this idea. She rejects the idea that the texts refer to real atheists (Stroumsa 1999: 122–4).

In the European world some arguments of the early Muslim world were repeated some centuries later. At that time the professionalized speculative theologians of the era of the so-called scholasticism (twelfth to fourteenth centuries) composed the proofs of God's existence. The Latin Masters actively quoted some Arabic scholars. In the tract by Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109), who started the tradition, the adversary is clearly a theoretical construct ([1078] 1986): again we meet the fool, who speaks in his heart that there is no God (Psalms 14 and 51). This time, the phrase is meant in the literal sense. In form and scope Anselm's work reaches a new level compared to earlier Christian commentaries to this Psalm. Anselm strives to dispute the thesis that there is no God with rational arguments and without the help of revealed truths. In the following centuries these lines of reasoning form part of the introductions of the great theological works of the masters, which were the obligatory textbooks of the time (Daniels 1909). These broadly read school works were the *Summae* as well as the commentaries on the *Sententiae* of Peter the Lombard. One most influential author of a *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) probed the theistic proposition without mentioning any historical adversary ([1265–1274] 1888–1906: I–I, qu. 2, art. iii). William of Ockham (1285/90–1348), another important master, refers to anonymous contemporaries who doubt that there is a God ([1322–4] 1980: I, 1, 1, p. 2, 27–8).

The proofs did not establish the basis of belief, either in the Arabic or in the Latin treatises. Belief was given by faith. Opponents of Muslim and Latin speculative theology even considered these proofs to be superfluous at best and heretical at worst. In their eyes God surpassed human reasoning. Yet the arguments demonstrated the reliability of the rational method the intellectuals advocated (Stroumsa 1999: 122ff.). Here, too, some modern scholars support the theory that the anonymous non-believers of William of Ockham and the general interest in these demonstrations represent real atheists of the time (Reynolds 1991; Pluta 2011).

However, there are good reasons to assume that those who systematically treated the sentence that there is no God were not the heterodox philosophers. Rather the orthodox theologians themselves developed the argument. One may say, therefore, that beside the ancient traditions one of the main roots of Western atheism is the speculative theology of the Middle Ages. The difference between the medieval world and the modern era is not so much an increase of radicality or validity of the proposition, but rather the fact that at the time none of the Latin masters, neither theologians nor philosophers, took the thought seriously. Consequently, unlike many other propositions (e.g., the eternity of the world), the sentence 'there is no God' was never banned from being discussed in the European schools. It could be treated as a sophistic assertion of the same quality as the absurd statement that the Trojan War is still continuing. In this context Siger of Brabant (c.1240–1283) presented the idea that there is no God in his so-called *Impossibilia*, intended for the training of students in logical disputation ([c.1270s] 1974: 67–97).

A case in point is the pagan interlocutor in a fictitious inter-religious disputation between a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim by Raimundus Lullus (1232/3–1316). This pagan man, clearly a theoretical construct like Anselm's fool, is presented as a sad and ignorant fool as long as he has no knowledge of God. Only after being introduced to this basic information by the three religious sages is he designated a 'wise philosopher' (Ramon Lull [c.1270s]). The reception of the materialistic cosmography of Lucretius (c.99–c.55 BCE) in the Latin Middle Ages is another example. Far from ever appearing on black lists the work was copied a few times for monasteries in the early Middle Ages. The work was repeatedly used as a stylistic model, yet was not taken seriously as a cosmological theory. In the scholars' eyes, Lucretius was simply a poor madman with absurd ideas, who suffered from a terrible life and death (Reeve 2007).

Hugh of St Victor (1096–1141) in Paris explained different levels of faith. On the lowest level the existence of God is recognized (*fides cognitionis*). On the next levels the divine truth is accepted and actively taken on, the believer entirely trusts his life to God, he now believes in God (Weltecke 2010: 437). An educated man from the schools had at least reached the first level. Knowledge of God distinguished him from ignorant peasants, women, or beasts. Writers occasionally reveal the anxiety that perhaps it was the other way round and the believer might be the fool, yet this apprehension remained an under-current. Only at the end of the Middle Ages the tides seem slowly to begin to turn. Some scholars, like their Muslim counterparts centuries earlier, connect the idea of doubts in belief or in the purposefulness of any religious cult to the arrogance of philosophy as well as to bodily ailments (Hankins 2007). At the occasion of the Council of Constance,

1414–18, Poggio Braccioloni (1380–1459), who, like other humanists, browsed old libraries in search of old manuscripts, visited the monasteries of the region. He came across a manuscript of Lucretius and, while remaining a theist himself, considered the materialist cosmology at least worth studying. A new era began.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL CARE

Doubts free of adherence to a heresy were gathered in books used for education and for spiritual edification. One could perhaps also read Sa'adyā Gaon's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* in this context. Sa'adyā was a sagacious teacher indeed, who took the doubts of students seriously and as one step towards knowledge (Sa'adyā Gaon [933] 1989: 9–26). At the same time Sa'adyā polemicized against those who rejected rational inquiring of this kind. Sa'adyā mentions people who seemed not to believe in or to worship any God or Gods (ibid.: 34–5). Interestingly, he does not dispute the idea that there is no God, but instead refutes the proposition that there are two (ibid.: 37ff.). Dualistic theology in general was the more menacing tendency for monotheists than atheism and thus reappears in polemics and theoretical theology. This was also the case in the Latin world. Ramón Sibiuda (d. 1436) wrote a tract for not professionally trained monks (like Carthusians), nuns and laypeople also covering dualism and many other doubts about orthodox Christian teachings, but not atheism ([1434–6] 1966).

Following early traditions the Latin Christian world conceptualized religious doubts as 'temptations', as something which torments the believer with God's assent to prove his worth. Pope Gregory the Great (c.540–604) wrote about them, and he was widely read in monastic and clerical circles. During the next centuries temptations all in all remained behind the walls of the monasteries and inside the confessors' chambers. Only at the threshold to the High Middle Ages, the Benedictine Monk Otloh of St Emmeram (c.1010–79) wrote openly about them. Instead of 'philosopher' as a 'friend of wisdom' he calls the protagonist of his story a 'friend of doubts' (*amator dubitationis*). This persona doubts the truth of the Holy Scriptures and the existence of God. His own sad situation and the terrible state of the world seemed plausible arguments (Otloh of St Emmeram [1060s] 1999: 256, 286). A demon seems to susurrate these destabilizing thoughts into his ear. Mention should be made here of a contemporary parallel from the Muslim world. In his philosophical parable 'Hayy b. Yaqzān' the Persian scholar Ibn Sina (973/980–1037) also speaks about demons whispering into the ear of humans and taking over their thoughts and their behaviour. They suggest that there is no eternal being that rules in heaven (Ibn Sīnā, § 19, p. 46). Otloh had no knowledge of Ibn Sīnā. Yet the faithful on both sides of the Mediterranean faced similar problems and found similar ways to describe and to conceptualize them. Otloh intended his *Liber de Temptatione* for novices who suffered like the tempted persona of his narration did. Some modern

scholars struggled to accept Otloh's sentences for what they are, but Otloh is sufficiently explicit about them. Other writers were much more oblique. Edifying self-descriptions by doubters, although written to the present age, are very rare.

More often atheist thoughts are related about others. These stories, edifying *exempla*, intended for use in the spiritual care, were especially told about unschooled hermits, monks, nuns, and recluses. The religious sincerity and the high morality of these personas were given within the frame of these narrations (not in others) and thus listeners could identify themselves with their struggles.

Another way to interpret atheist thoughts was to declare them as lack of knowledge. When Latin pastors became more interested in the religious state of the lay communities during the central Middle Ages, atheistic feelings among them were noted. One of these acute observers was Peter of Cornwall, the Prior of Holy Trinity in Algate (c.1139–1221). In the preface to a work of his Peter wrote that few people still believed in idols nowadays, but many assumed that there was no God, that the world was eternal and that it was ruled by chance, not by divine providence. Peter interpreted these erroneous convictions as childish ignorance. He claims to confront these doubts with a collection of narrations on visions (Flanagan 2008: 86). A hundred years later Guillaume Peyrault (c.1200–71) also treated the problem of non-belief in his widely read work intended for (not university trained) pastors and for their flock in the cities (Guillaume Peyrault, 46). He explained to them that the belief that there is no God was an utterly foolish proposition. Those who accepted such a theory as true were not even worth a punishment. They needed brains instead of beatings. Four hundred years before Blaise Pascal (1623–62) and 400 years after the first Muslim thinkers (Chokr: 1993: 124) he demonstrated that to believe was the more prudent and the more rational decision. While Guillaume acknowledged the lack of empirical proof he stressed that believing would cause no harm, should it be unfounded. Not to believe, however, could result in an unwelcome surprise in the face of the Divine Judge after death (Guillaume Peyrault, 50–51; Weltecke 2010: 445f).

By regularly asking penitents whether they believed 'firmly' as was demanded by the Fourth Lateran Council, confessors became aware of doubts. The situation of confession itself also gave rise to introspection and doubts. As reformers were aware of this correlation they advised parsons not to be too harsh with tormented penitents. However, the theologians did not consider these feelings worthy of theological and philosophical consideration.

As the Latin pastoral reformers tried to systematize acts and thoughts by the communities they developed the received Early Christian categories of vices and virtues since the 13th century. These categories reveal their observations and interpretations. An important category was *acedia*. *Acedia* (among other aspects) described a state in which a person's relation towards faith and the church in general was affected. In this case feelings like strong tedium, dislike of and indifference towards God and everything spiritual accompanied the reluctance to act as one should. *Acedia* by definition named a pure rejection of and disinterest in faith on an ascending scale. In the middle of the fifteenth century the Augustinian Canon Stephan of Landskron (d. 1477) in Vienna wrote a spiritual work in German for lay people in the cities who were able to read German.

His book, *The Road to Heaven* (hymelstraß), is very mild in its exhortations and easy to read. Talking about *acedia* he acknowledged feelings and thoughts against the faith which already had become traditional. According to Stephan, these feelings destroyed one's internal consent to faith. Yet one should not distress oneself because of such uncontrolled thoughts. Only when a person gave his or her inner consent to this dislike *acedia* became a capital sin (Stephan von Landskron, f. 102r–102v). This is also the case for those who despised, actively scorned or disturbed the celebration of the sacraments in church because of their irreconcilable aversion (Stephan von Landskron, f. 53r). As a sin *acedia* was punished with excommunication. In order to obtain penitence one had to ask for it with sincere contrition. According to these writings contrition was not self-understood. Stephan is very aware that his admonitions reached only those who were interested in their spiritual welfare.

In the early Muslim world the theodicy problem was discussed intensively because of the confrontation between monotheist and dualist religions. In Eastern Christian communities the experience of catastrophes led to a theological debate on the theodicy question. In the Latin world the theodicy problem was of no concern for theoretical thought until the New Modern Era. Latin theoreticians relied largely on traditional answers from the Late Antiquity like the *Consolatio Philosophiae* by Boethius (475/8–c.525). As an answer to why the tyrant was not hindered by the almighty God, Boethius explained that the tyrant might do what he liked but not what he really wished. The true aim of everything human, he said, was the highest good. The tyrant, however, was never able to reach it. In this respect the oppressor is powerless, in spite of his worldly might. More than 400 manuscripts of this text are extant, many commentaries explain the difficult language. Boethius even provided an influential model for explaining fugacity, felicity and providence. Later writers strove to emulate him and composed consolatory books (Auer 1928). Other philosophical traditions like stoicism taught how to endure injustice. Astrologers explained catastrophes with the laws of nature and the effects of the stars.

When practitioners were confronted with concrete questions concerning Divine Justice in the face of earthly injustices they conceptualized these protests as a vice, the vice of *murmur*. Numerous examples in the spiritual literature confirm that *murmur* was something of an ambient noise of medieval Christian life. Many pastors saw *murmur* during a deadly disease as especially dangerous for the soul and constantly warned against impatience (*impatientia*) during illness. They acknowledged that on their deathbed some people were afflicted with fury and spoke in their hearts 'there is no God at all, there is no justice' (Stephan von Landskron: f. 200v–201r).

CONCLUSION

The medieval period was decisive for the formation of the atheist discourse in two ways. Intensive interreligious debates and the professionalization of theology and philosophy produced rational, philosophically founded polemics against particular religious

systems by the different opponents. In the modern world, these arguments were ready to be taken up by critics of any religion. The atheist alternative in the Middle Ages also existed as a thought. Yet it is known to us as a theoretical construct by the orthodox academics themselves. The masters gathered arguments for and against the proposition that there is no God, without ever affirming it themselves. As their debate augmented and surpassed the ancient discussion on atheism and as their treatment was an integral part of any systematic theological tract, one could argue that the scholars were in part also responsible for the emergence of the phenomenon itself. At any rate their debate was also taken up after the year 1500 by critics of religion.

Although there are obvious differences between the established religions' treatment of the atheistic idea there are also clear parallels. The Latin world even repeated debates some centuries after the early Muslims, albeit not on the same high intellectual level. In general the medieval reactions to the absence of faith are similar among each other and differ from the modern world. In contrast to modern obsessions with the atheism debate, the medieval worlds did not take atheism all too seriously. Instead, religious and secular elites largely considered alternative religious convictions as much more dangerous than no belief at all.

From the extant court records and legal collections it seems that neither religious law nor any concrete forms of persecution were aimed at the persecution of atheists. The reason for the fact that no heterodox philosophers are known who affirmed the atheist idea, was certainly not the fear of persecution. Atheism was considered as an immorality, as a sign of ignorance, or as a spiritual problem. For that reason atheistic feelings among the public were treated with educational means and confessional admonition. Latin Christianity systematized atheistic thoughts as a spiritual problem and as a vice. Finally, to come back to the questions asked in the beginning: did atheism exist in the Middle Ages? The answer will be yes and no: modern atheism developed within a specific discourse, which rests on medieval roots but which started with a radical reshuffle of medieval arguments. There are good sources to argue, however, that there were people who did not believe in the existence of a God or gods.

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CHAPTER 12

RENAISSANCE AND
REFORMATION

DENIS J.-J. ROBICHAUD

*Ainsi la fausse opinion
Se masquant de religion,
Elle peut nuire davantage,
Que quand ce masque estant osté,
On se garde qu'elle n'outrage,
En découvrant de quel costé
Pourroit arriver le dommage.*

—P. Nicolas Girault, *Minime* (Mersenne 1624)

ATHEISTS AND ATHEISM

WERE there atheists and was there atheism in the Renaissance and the Reformation? There are no clear records for self-professed atheists at the twilight of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Still Marin Mersenne, the influential member of the order of the Minim Friars and an acquaintance of René Descartes and other notable philosophers, believed that atheists masked themselves as Christians and in his *Questiones celeberrimae in genesim* of 1623 he states that one can find fifty thousand atheists solely in Paris (Mersenne 1623: cols. 235–462). Just four years earlier the Italian philosopher Giulio Cesare Vanini was tried and executed by the Parlement of Toulouse for the crimes of *lèse-majesté* and atheism. To be sure Mersenne counted Vanini among contemporary atheists (Hine 1976). Later periods often either questioned Mersenne's inflated numbers or objected to his attack against imagined atheists. Voltaire, for instance, was not convinced. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, he contradicts Mersenne (whom he sardonically calls 'le minime et très minime Mersenne') by not only claiming that Vanini was not an atheist but that presumed atheists were usually mere unorthodox philosophers