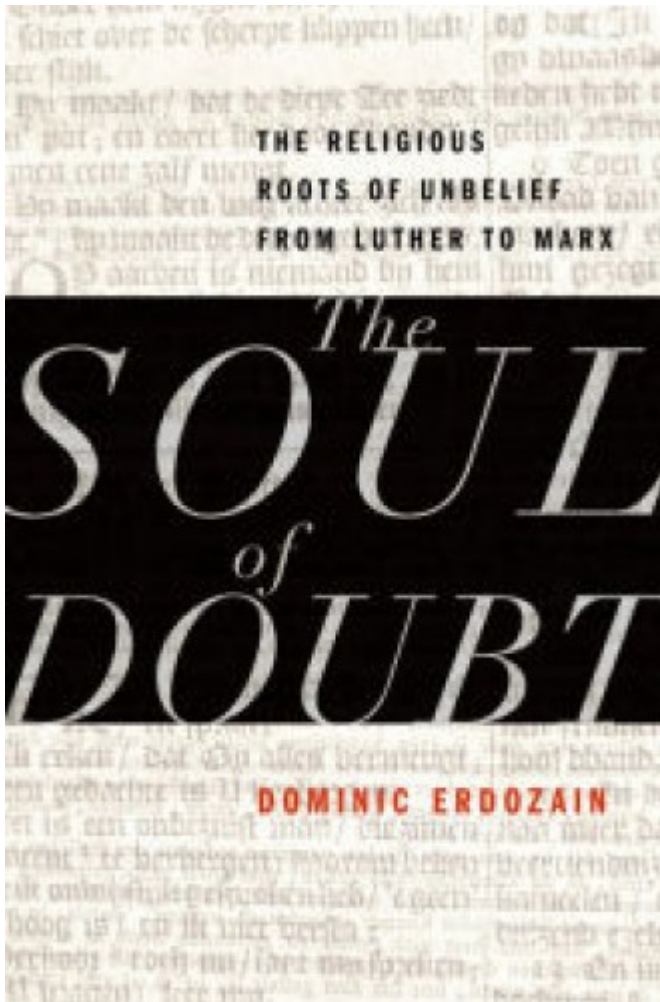


Faith's ghastly legacy

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue

In Review



The Soul of Doubt

By Dominic Erdozain

Oxford University Press

Church history is theology learned from examples. At least that's the way Dominic Erdozain sees it; and it makes for compelling and absorbing reading. Judiciously researched and lucidly, often deliciously, argued, *The Soul of Doubt* is a 500-year

sweep of elegant simplicity. Erdozain has two targets: the pervasive secular compulsion “to build a narrative of objective, scientific reason triumphing over ignorance and superstition,” and the complacency of Christians, both lay and scholarly, in failing to realize that the responsibility for rebellion against the faith lies invariably at their own door.

The latter is a criticism leveled with love, but nonetheless an excoriation that makes the book resemble a sober Lenten scourging. Any pastor who has been dismayed by a congregation’s superiority complex in relation to its neighborhood will be struck by these words of Ludwig Feuerbach: “Faith gives a man a peculiar sense of his own dignity and importance. The believer finds himself distinguished above other men, exalted above the natural man; he knows himself to be a person of distinction, in the possession of peculiar privileges; believers are aristocrats, unbelievers plebeians. God is this distinction between and pre-eminence of believers above unbelievers, personified.” In other words, Christianity has frequently become a pretext for arrogance, a cover for complacency, such that a critic like Feuerbach can see faith and love at war, and thus perceive the need to assert a pure, atheist virtue of love in the face of faith’s ghastly legacy.

Feuerbach is among numerous examples of the phenomenon at the heart of Erdozain’s argument: earnest and upright citizens who are drawn to the God of Jesus Christ but come to see Christianity as overly precise and hasty to judge. The church has repeatedly become a factory of fear, offering little besides “doom, destruction, and selective redemption.” The culprit above all is Augustine, held to have burdened the race with his own perversities. As Erdozain wryly notes, “The Augustinian psychology of terror that provoked the Reformation arguably destroyed it.” Unbelief came to be fueled, in the words of George Eliot, by fear of “a God who instead of sharing and aiding our human sympathies, is directly in collision with them.” Erdozain exquisitely observes that Eliot’s unbelief, like that of many of the figures in this survey, “knew what a religion ought to look like. It retained the title of ownership after it had left the building.”

The most damaging sin of the church’s theological overreach was predestination. The Quaker Samuel Fisher claimed Calvinist double predestination turned God into “a merciless tyrant and arrant hypocrite,” a master who held out “meat to a starving man in the full knowledge that he cannot take it.” If a king offered pardon to 1,000 men on terms that 999 could not fulfill, it would not be mercy to pardon the thousandth. Erdozain tirelessly argues and illustrates how Fisher and others (many

of whom found themselves pushed even further away, like Baruch Spinoza and Pierre Bayle) represented an unbelief that was heterodox, not atheistic. Their attacks were laments, not rampages. Their convictions about God, faith, and the Bible were deep and sincere.

Voltaire is perhaps the definitive example for the view that “Enlightenment reason did not symbolize the imperialism of the intellect so much as the battered protest of the soul.” While Voltaire was condemned as a diabolical infidel, in Erdozain’s eyes he was a defiantly Christian thinker who “hated intellectual pretension and despised any philosophy that privileged ideas over human decency or practical experience.” His virulent anticlericalism stemmed not from atheism but from “protest against a flesh-cutting theology of exclusion.” In Voltaire’s own words, “Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy, that is the very foolish daughter of a wise and intelligent mother.”

As the narrative draws closer to the present, the forms of contemporary debate begin to take shape. It is to Erdozain’s credit that he lets the reader infer such conclusions, himself remaining content to tell a story that is safely tucked away in the past. But it would take a particularly inattentive reader to miss the salience of observations like these: “Science became a symbol and weapon of unbelief, but it was rarely a cause,” and “Calvin played a larger part in the Victorian crisis of faith than Darwin.” Typical of this dynamic is the celebrated Scopes trial of 1925. The instigator of the protest against a ban on teaching evolution was provoked when he attended the funeral of a six-year-old and heard the preacher informing the child’s mother that her son was undoubtedly in the flames of hell.

An analysis of 150 Victorian freethinkers found that ideas relating to geology or evolution were influential in only three cases. In the words of historian Edward Royle, “just as Christian belief can be, and often is, funded on an emotional response in a given situation, to be confirmed later by intellectually satisfying ‘evidences,’ so infidelity seems to have frequently been inspired by disgust with the Church and moral revulsion against Christian doctrines, and then sustained by a growing intellectual conviction of the rightness of such a rejection.” The eminent Victorian Benjamin Jowett indicted the false orthodoxy that transferred the imperfection of human law to the Divine, representing God as “angry with us for what we never did; ready to inflict a disproportionate punishment on us for what we are; satisfied by the sufferings of his son in our stead.” George Eliot polished her character Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* to illustrate every worst characteristic of the self-justifying, egoistic,

yet piously sincere tyrant that meticulous Christianity could create.

Erdozain castigates, but invariably in choice quotations from those whose story he tells. He dismantles the comprehensive pretension of secularist arguments while at the same time showing Christianity to be guilty of most of their moral complaints. He dismisses Alasdair MacIntyre's scorn toward the Enlightenment and sweeps aside William Cavanaugh's rereading of Europe's Wars of Religion: both accounts fail to appreciate how much the church had it coming. Erdozain's argument is as relentless as it is well substantiated and unerringly illustrated.

It's a grim but strangely hopeful narrative. For it turns out that, ironically, in the words of Nietzsche, what finally triumphed over the Christian God was Christian morality itself.