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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Early Modern Uncertainty: A Cultural Revolution and a Historiographical Turn?

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Uncertainty in Post-Reformation Catholicism. A History of Probabilism.
By Stefania Tutino. Oxford University Press, 2017.
Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt. By Alec Ryrie. Harvard University Press, 2019.
The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. By Ethan Shagan. Princeton University Press, 2019.

In recent years[1], scholarship on early modern Europe seems to have taken, or to be taking, an "uncertainty turn." On the one hand, scholars are increasingly attending to topics such as "doubt" or "uncertainty" in the early modern age, sometimes stressing their connections with medieval culture (see for example Andrews, Methuen and Spicer 2016). Early modern uncertainty is a vast and flexible notion that concerns moral decision making, the epistemological status of disciplines, the vexed question of unbelief and atheism, and the emotions of early modern individuals. On the other hand, correlative categories such as "certainty" and "belief" also are attracting growing interest. Arguably, present-day issues, such as the overflow of information we experience, religious tolerance and coexistence, secularization, and the unprecedented complexity and entanglement of our world, foster questions regarding the meaning of belief, the spaces and uses of doubt, and the limits of certainty.

In this book review essay, I will discuss a few recent works that explore these topics, with the caveat that I am not aiming to provide an exhaustive review of all available scholarship. That the early modern age was an "age of anxiety," to put it in William J. Bouwsma's words, may now sound like a scholarly platitude (although, as Alec Ryrie's book suggests, this anxiety was considerably more sizable in specific contexts). There is little need to list here the reasons for such anxiety: suffice it to say that such reasons were political, religious, cultural, and economic (Bouwsma 1990). While Bouwsma covers in his essay a "long" Renaissance, extending roughly from Petrarch to the seventeenth century, other scholars have narrowed their field to a single century. For example, Remo Guidi has investigated at length the specific anxiety of the fifteenth century that, despite its roots in (among others) medieval spirituality, appears to be a response to specific political and religious conditions (Guidi 2007).

Despite the continuities with earlier centuries, it appears that in the early modern time being sure of something, believing something, or simply giving one's assent to a proposition were complex acts, probably less natural and spontaneous than they had

ever been. Not by chance scholars speak of a "Pyrrhonian crisis" marking the second half of the sixteenth century. "Certainty" was the object of a quest, as the titles of recent works suggest, and, as in all quests, the reward was not always granted (Schreiner 2011; Fuchs and García-Arenal 2020). On the contrary, doubt and uncertainty became an increasingly familiar condition to many early modern Europeans. For sure before and after the early modern period experiences such as war, famine, plague, political and social changes, religious turmoil — even on a small scale — caused instability on all social levels, an increase in the unpredictability of events, and the — sometimes traumatic — adjustment of personal and group relations. These phenomena in turn produced uncertainty and psychological disquiet (see the exemplary analysis of the small town of Santena in late seventeenth-century Piedmont by Levi [1985] 2020). However, it seems to me hard to deny that the sheer magnitude of the events taking place around the end of the fifteenth century was likely to create effects quite out of the ordinary. At least in Italy, the generations born between the 1480s and the 1510s had to face unprecedented challenges (Burke 1974). The dissolution of traditional political and religious orders, and the ensuing political instability, the sudden acquaintance with other cultures, the rise of new faiths and confessions, and the discovery that nature was richer and full of more secrets than traditional knowledge could account for, certainly had gnoseological and epistemological consequences. This was not a purely intellectual phenomenon that affected only scientists, philosophers, or humanists. Rather, it was a condition that exerted a powerful impact on the everyday life of men and women across all social classes. As a result, "believing" became a progressively complex action, which required policing by religious and/ or political authorities.

From different standpoints, the three volumes examined here argue that the consequences of the intellectual revolution that placed doubt and uncertainty at the very center of Western culture were instrumental in shaping our own understanding of categories such as "belief," "opinion," and "faith." Unraveling the intricate world of early modern uncertainty now seems all the more urgent since the early modern world, as I mentioned, shares some features, *mutatis mutandis*, with our present reality. As we shall see, the three books here reviewed conclude suggesting that the study of early modern uncertainty helps to understand the origins and functioning of some features of our contemporary culture. In particular, all authors seem to interrogate themselves on the problematic status of "opinions" and "facts" — and of their reciprocal relationship — in a world that Tutino qualifies as "re-enchanted" (359) by an unprecedented flux of information. As a scholar working on what I term "cultures of doubt" in early modern Italy, I decidedly subscribe to these positions. In particular, I find of crucial importance the attempt to understand doubt and uncertainty outside the familiar conceptual frame of skepticism or libertinism as well as the effort of seeing them as building blocks of contemporary Western culture.

In *The Birth of Modern Belief*, Ethan Shagan explores the evolution of the category of belief from the Middle Ages to the present era and subverts the idea of a progressive loss of belief from the Middle Ages onwards. Rather, he argues that we witness a proliferation of belief, a word that we tend to consider a synonym of "opinion." Today, it is a shared assumption that everyone is entitled to their beliefs; this assumption, however, has its own history. According to Shagan, in the Middle Ages, for all the debates surrounding

the idea of belief, there was no such thing as personal belief; believing meant essentially believing in the Roman Church. The Reformation changed the state of things and it was precisely at the time of the Reformation that doubt and belief crossed paths, often inextricably. Shagan aptly recalls that, according to Martin Luther, Eve's first sin was "unbelief or doubt" (69). For Luther and the reformers, then, believing became the act of choosing to believe in salvation through faith; relying on doctrine or following exterior practices imposed by any kind of Church were no longer sufficient guarantees of being a true believer. Believers were exhorted to knowingly trust in saving faith, but even salvation through faith required some knowledge and appropriate pedagogy. On the other hand, when organizing its response to the Reformation, the Roman Church reframed belief as obedience and adherence to its teachings, which, again, required pedagogy and catechetical efforts. If, up to that point, belief had been a datum, after the Reformation it became a goal, an ideal that common pessimism concerning human nature, especially in the Protestant field, rendered, if not unattainable, certainly stressful and psychologically demanding. As Shagan observes, the Reformation and Catholic responses to this epistemic shift ushered in "an epochal transformation of 'belief' in European society: while previously valued for its ubiquity, belief now obtained value from scarcity" (97).

Shagan explores the consequences of this shift in a section of his book that can be put into dialogue with Alec Ryrie's study of the emotions of religious doubt. In Chapters 3 and 4, "The Invention of the Unbeliever" and "The Unbearable Weight of Believing," Shagan articulates the relationship between doubt, belief, and incredulity, also recently explored by George McClure from the perspective of literary texts featuring the doubt-casting Greek God Momus (McClure 2018). The Catholic Church defined unbelief as deviation from its teachings. More than a matter of content, Shagan observes, the problem of heresy was "its method of truth-seeking, which depended upon human speculation and interpretation" (111). Speculation and interpretation were, in fact, synonyms of doubt, and so Catholics came to see Protestantism as "a negative religion, a form of doubt rather than belief" (113). Behind this position was an awareness that once one started to doubt or deny given religious tenets, the door opened to further doubts until nothing remained of religious belief. For example, in the 1540s and early 1550s, some Italian disciples of Juan de Valdés followed his teachings to their extreme. Using systematic doubt to dismantle religious dogma, they followed a painful and distressing path that – despite moments of intellectual exhilaration fostered by unrestrained inquiry into religious dogma – eventually led to isolation and severance from the social body (Addante 2010).

For Protestants, pessimism concerning human nature led to the assumption that sinners should be considered unbelievers. Because in Protestants' eyes Catholics and Anabaptists were unbelievers too, the world was soon filled with unbelievers. To believe in predestination and act accordingly could prove difficult, if not impossible, in a corrupt world. Shagan offers some insightful considerations on this topic. For example, he notes that "far from liberalizing an authoritarian Catholic world, the invention of the unbeliever in the Reformation structured a new form of authoritarianism" (125). This happened because it was generally assumed that people were not a flock of sinners, but rather a horde of unbelievers. The first consequence of this was that "while Catholics disciplined populations to believe, Protestants learned how to discipline populations of unbelievers" (125). Those who were part of what Lutherans deemed "the unregenerate majority" were

now "presumed to be genuinely reprobate rather than merely pious sinners" (125). The second consequence of this shift was that policing replaced conversion: you could not change a reprobate, but you could control them. According to Shagan:

> … for Protestants … the state of souls was essentially beside the point: true repentance was presumed to be vanishingly rare, a gratuitous gift of God's grace rather than the routine end to routine petty proceedings in the Church courts. So, rather than producing belief, these proceedings were intended to manage the efflorescence of unbelief in our sinful world, punishing or shaming offenders until they hid their sinfulness deep inside where it belonged. (127)

Shagan argues that both Catholics and Protestants made belief increasingly difficult since both parties "determined that only particular doctrines, and only particular ways of holding those doctrines, and only particular sources of assurance of those doctrines, constituted Christian belief" (132). The combination of a new, more difficult conception of belief and the pessimistic view about the diffusion of unbelief gave birth to questions concerning how reliable any belief could be. This new scenario was especially challenging for Protestants who were left alone with their inner faith without the assurance of Catholic rituals: Shagan notes that if "belief in God was belief that you yourself were saved by believing, it followed that doubt about your own salvation amounted to doubting God" (133). Here Shagan highlights the inherent paradox (or, as he puts it, the "tension") of Protestant belief: on the one hand it was "an understanding of 'belief' as utterly incompatible with doubt"; yet, on the other hand, it was "a theology of human depravity demanding that even the elect remain mired in uncertainty" (134). This contrast generated sizable anxiety in Protestant believers as well as an outpouring of writings in which people spelled out their doubts and the painful emotions associated with them. As we shall see, Ryrie's book casts light precisely on these emotions. Shagan, too, speaks of the "psychic turmoil generated by predestination" (140). This turmoil was the result of the request that believers scrupulously examine their consciences and of the awareness that all sins are violations of the first commandment ("I am the Lord thy God") and, therefore, an act of doubt and unbelief. Protestants thus came to realize "their incapacity for the sort of utter reliance on God and immaculate freedom from doubt that they had been taught was the definition of authentic belief" (140). Catholics instead had to obey their Church, but also had available to them "a broad array of spiritual choices, not just about what to believe but about how and why to believe it" (146); there were opinions that the Church did not care to arbitrate. One may even recall, following Giorgio Caravale's suggestions, the double standard adopted by the Church toward traditional or "superstitious" beliefs and prayers, which were strictly prohibited in public ceremonies but somehow tolerated in private (Caravale 2011). Consequently, forms of "popular" belief coexisted with standard and sanctioned belief.

Shagan's reconstruction of the story of belief faces a turn in the early seventeenth century, when "among influential writers on both sides of the Reformation, *probable belief*, based upon the judicious weighing of evidence, emerged as Christian belief indeed" (194). This stress on individual agency and, so to speak, critical assessment on the part of the individual was part of a broader cultural change resulting from the aforementioned *crise pyrrhonienne* of the late sixteenth century and the new scientific revolution. If the former, along with the growing intricacies of belief, exposed Christian belief to doubt and, therefore, to opinions, the latter, based on "induction,

experimentation, and probabilistic reasoning" determined a paradigm shift. Shagan argues that within this shift "religious knowledge might have been a leading rather than trailing indicator" (195). Shagan's reasoning seems to be that the partial convergence of knowledge, belief, and opinion that characterized the new culture could be a partial result of the changes in the religious paradigm of belief. Two other competing forces were at work in this particular step of the evolution of belief. The first was the growing importance of historical faith. This means that the "individual, propositional, *historical* judgment of Christians becomes the essence of faith" (191) and that the "diligent inquiry of prudent men whether to believe a proposition" (194) was considered sufficient ground for religious belief. Here we see the culmination of a process that maintained "the primacy of the intellect over the will" (191) or, more clearly, how "intellectual assent to the factual matter of Christianity, the stories and doctrines of the Bible, came to be accounted authentic Christian belief" (185–6). According to Shagan, this meant that, following Lelio Sozzini's doctrine, "anyone who believes intellectually that the scripture is true is also bound to believe its promises and attempt to fulfill their obligations" (190).

The second force at work in this step of the evolution of belief was the Jesuit effort to convert indigenous people. The Jesuits' catechetical efforts had to negotiate and compete with other beliefs. To do so, the Fathers sometimes had to resort to forms of simple scientific experimentalism to prove indigenous beliefs wrong or to prove the reality of Christian doctrines (for example, the existence of infernal fire). Jesuit missionaries thus made religious belief more material and more scientific, breaking down the difference between faith and knowledge and belief and opinion. Here again, we see one of the defining moments of the transformation of belief into opinion, one which was the result of a discussion and a choice more than an imposition from above. In fact, Shagan's main argument is that, increasingly over the centuries, belief tended to identify with opinion, which is our current understanding of it. During the Enlightenment, belief came to coincide with a form of individual judgment based on weighing evidence and assessing different reasons. Thus, during the Enlightenment, and probably for the first time, "the function of the believer was to judge rather than submit to judgment" (210).

Alec Ryrie's *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* offers fresh insight into the "penumbras of doubt and unbelief" (9). This book is a fascinating journey into the ways in which early modern Europeans expressed their religious doubt. Ryrie rightly does not equate doubt with atheism: most of the time, it is exactly the opposite. Doubt can, in fact, originate from (too) rigorous faith or from the desperate need to believe: "only those who cared enough to believe also cared enough to doubt" (138), so that "faith and doubt are not alternatives but companions, inevitably intertwined" (139). Certainly, people who nurtured such doubt could perceive themselves as atheists, but they were atheists of a peculiar kind. The tormented soul that doubted itself to death (and, sometimes, this was not just a metaphor) was often an atheist "who could think of little else but God, and who feared he did not exist" (108). Ryrie subscribes to Shagan's idea that believing became increasingly hard after the Reformation. In Ryrie's words, "if you have too high or idealistic a definition of *belief*, you turn everyone, including yourself, into an unbeliever" (79) or, more concisely, "belief became both glorious and unattainable" (109). Like Shagan, Ryrie has chosen a broad historiographical approach that moves from the Middle Ages to the present. Although he is less systematic than Shagan (the bulk of his

book focuses on the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries), his array of sources seems more diverse than Shagan's. Because Ryrie delves into the emotional life of early modern believers, with a special eye on English Protestantism, his sources include the voices of women and teenagers, playwrights and theologians, philosophers and obscure preachers. As a result, Ryrie has produced a fascinating depiction of the excruciating processes of self-examination that became, if not standard practice, certainly quite common in the Protestant world. Ryrie's main distinction is between the unbelief of anger and the unbelief of anxiety. Anger and anxiety are the two emotions associated with doubt, and it is worth noting that both can either trigger doubt or be triggered by it. Already in the Middle Ages religion could be challenged in a variety of ways: "anger with God, hatred for priests, rejections of transubstantiation, scepticism about life after death" (23). These attitudes were generally labeled as Epicureanism, which was a synonym of incredulity. To my knowledge, the extent to which the category of "unbelief" (or of "atheism") can be legitimately applied to the Middle Ages is still debated by scholars (it certainly applied to some individuals; see Murray 1972 1986; Reynolds 1991).

I shall pause briefly on this point to recall that we are dealing here with forms of perplexity or doubt that were spread across people from all walks of life. No one would deny that skeptical strands were present in medieval philosophy (Lagerlund 2009), nor that occasional forms of skepticism toward specific aspects of Catholic doctrine can be found before the fifteenth century, even among commoners. John Arnold has spoken of the existence in the Middle Ages of "a dissent of plurality, doubt, and relativism" leading in some cases to "what we might call comparative religion" (Arnold [2005] 2011, 229). Again, more than atheism "in a modern sense," the Middle Ages might have known a form of atheism in which "God probably exists [but] he is clearly a long way off and little concerned in the practicalities of human affairs" (Arnold [2005] 2011, 229). Nonetheless, it seems difficult to dispute that, starting from the fifteenth century, the rediscovery of Lucretius, the development of philology (biblical philology in particular), and the view of religion as an imposture developed by thinkers such as Machiavelli complicated medieval unbelief, opening paths into incredulity that lasted well into the sixteenth century. For these reasons, it would be incorrect to speak of a "pre-Reformation" and a "post-Reformation." However, it is undeniable that the Reformation ushered in a remarkable change of religious belief as well as of religious doubt. As Arnold himself observes, "one of the things that changed with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation was the arrival of a much stronger sense of having to position oneself securely within a precise doctrinal framework" (Arnold [2005] 2011, 231) or, in other words, "a tightening up of definition and control, and a closing down of certain fuzziness and room for manoeuvre" (Arnold [2005] 2011, 231). Jean Calvin was aware of the risks associated with "gospel freedom, the heady claim that Christians ought to be liberated from the laws and regulations of formal piety" (Ryrie 2019, 48). If the Protestants taught the importance of doubt toward ceremonies and other exterior signs of devotion, the Catholics stressed the limits of reason. In trying to fight the Protestants' belief in Bible reading, Catholics ended up emphasizing the textual inconsistencies and discrepancies in the interpretation of the holy Scripture, which could hardly be resolved by lay readers. In sum, "all sides in the Reformation debates were encouraging both credulity and a corrosive scepticism, teaching believers simultaneously to doubt and to loathe doubting" (60). Because believing became so difficult, and doubting almost

inevitable, the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries saw a surge of atheists: the "atheist" became a sort of character, if not a caricature, with identifiable features. This character was "almost always male … a figure of some wealth and social standing … educated" (82–3). More often than not, atheists were imagined to be prone to carnal pleasures; but atheism was rarely truly doctrinal. More frequently it was pragmatic, either in the form of an angry rebellion against authority or a rejection of moral constraints. As Ryrie summarizes:

> In contemporary eyes, post-Reformation atheism was not really a doctrinal error. It was a form of wishful thinking. Men and (very occasionally) women whose lives were sufficiently easy and prosperous that they did not feel the need for God in this world, and who wanted to reject any constraints on their behavior, preferred to imagine that there was no eternal judgment to fear, no inspired Scripture to obey and, ideally, no God to lay bare the secrets of their foolish hearts. And so the distinction between speculative and practical atheists — those who claim there is no God, and those who live as if they believed that — broke down. (85)

To contemporaries, this breed of atheists was "both appalling and reassuring" since "atheists of this kind were monsters, but manageable ones, because … they had no moral authority" (96). Yet, unbelief could have an "ethics of its own" (101) and, therefore, become a tempting option for the agonized devotee. However, there existed a more threatening kind of atheist, the "puritan atheist," pious atheists who pushed their scruples so far that they dismantled their own faith. This is what Ryrie terms "the unbelief of anxiety" and its analysis is probably the most intriguing part of the volume (these pages could be put in dialogue with Rosenwein 2016, ch. 8, "Despair and Happiness," which explores the emotions of the early modern Reformed world with a special focus on Puritans). Ryrie focuses on English Puritans because their confessional organization was looser than that of Catholics or other Protestant groups. Disciplined churches offered an advantage to believers who were not certain about their faith: they could place their uncertainty in the community, following directives and rules. But, says Ryrie, "English Protestants had, by the early seventeenth century, developed a strain of obsessively introspective piety distinguished by contortionist feats of self-examination" (110). These atheists were melancholic because they were tormented by the problem of their own salvation. Doubting salvation meant doubting God; since "true faith, once found, cannot be lost," these people realized that maybe their "faith was false all along" (115). Ryrie points to the psychiatric dimension of this doubt, which was in fact a form of acute melancholy, if not of desperation. This is demonstrated by almost all tales of doubt, which share a common pattern to the point that they represent "a literary genre" (117). Doubt was a temptation that carved its way into one's soul, moving from questions concerning the immortality of the soul to the reliability of the Bible. Interestingly, Ryrie claims he has found little evidence of doubt triggered by worldly suffering. The lack of a direct tie to external causes must have complicated the picture: doubt made its dent deeper into people's souls, independently of rational explanations and material conditions. Yet, radical communities pursued their doubts about Scripture, trying to get rid of all vain incrustations that impeded true faith, coming to what Ryrie terms a "spiritualist minimalism" (147). A fascinating case of such minimalism is that of the so-called "Seekers," a group of "earnest excavators … churning up the landscape of traditional religion" (161), a "mood, not a sect" (162) refusing baptism and "ministry of any kind"

(164). Seekers retreated from religious rites because they believed that, as one of them put it, "the Lord and his truth was, but that it was made known to none upon earth" (166). These people chose to wait for a clear revelation of this truth and in the meantime they could indulge in carnal pleasures. More often than not, however, they somewhat tragically severed their social connections:

> Many Seekers struggled alone. Being a Seeker was almost defined by withdrawing from settled religious practice and "waiting upon the Lord" … The scruples that paralysed Seekers' devotion paralysed their sociability too. (167)

This is an important point: doubt often meant isolation, the loss of one's communal identity and, one may suggest, the loss of one's personal identity, too. In a different context, this happened to the Portuguese *converso* Uriel (Gabriel) Acosta (1585–1640) when he decided to reconvert to Judaism. He moved from Oporto in Portugal to Amsterdam and ended up an outcast from the local Jewish community (an account of his story at 98–100). The same happened in yet another world to the aforementioned Italian radical heretics in the 1540s and 1550s.

Uncertainty appears to have been a foundational element of early modern Western culture. Doubts and scruples could concern not just the strength of one's belief in God but everyday moral and practical choices. In fact, early moderns grew increasingly aware that rules could have many exceptions and answers were not always available. Choices could, and in fact, did, depend on one's interpretation of a given event, and this interpretation could, in turn, be more or less probable. Casuistry, the study of cases of conscience, traditionally had been the tool used to establish a dialectic relation between norm and exception by adapting general norms to specific events. In the second half of the sixteenth century, moral theologians decidedly embraced uncertainty and exceptions, turning them into a resource rather than a liability. A new doctrine grew out of the study of cases of conscience, which carried the alluring name of "probabilism" (on the Italian tradition of casuistry and its medieval roots see Turrini 1991; Rusconi 2002). A branch of moral theology dealing with probable opinions, probabilism was not entirely the creation of early modern Western theologians. However, from the second half of the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century, theologians — Dominicans first and Jesuits later — brought probabilism to an unprecedented level of subtlety, novelty, and audacity. In this sense, we may affirm that probabilism was, in fact, a peculiar product of the post-Reformation Catholic church. Probabilism can be considered a fruit of the same season that, while complicating belief, made doubt ubiquitous. In *Uncertainty in Post-Reformation Europe*, Stefania Tutino resuscitates a large corpus of works on moral theology — more frequently studied by theologians and philosophers than by historians — mastering its intricacies and subtleties with remarkable competence. Since probabilism was not a monolithic doctrine, different theologians presented their own articulations, each of them building on their predecessors' work. Each theologian strove to answer to and elaborate on one single, crucial question: how can we act in a condition of uncertainty? It is impossible to summarize here all their arguments, which often were convoluted and highly speculative. In a nutshell, probabilism is a doctrine that allows "the moral agent to follow a probable opinion, regardless of whether the opposite opinion is more

probable" (1). As Tutino argues, even when probabilism came to be identified with moral laxism in the incandescent seventeenth-century polemics, the Roman Curia and its two main policing institutions (the Congregation of the Index and the Inquisition) seldom took issue with the doctrine itself. Rather, the Curia was concerned about some of probabilism's (possible) practical applications, single propositions or radical outcomes. Tutino regards probabilism as a reaction to an age marked by powerful changes at all levels and moral theologians' attempt to rejuvenate their doctrine and their tools in order to face uncertainty. The spark that ignited the probabilistic fire was probably the need "to comfort doubtful and uncertain consciences and to solve such vexing dilemmas by allowing opinions (or, in some cases, doubts) to be proper criteria for action whenever the application of a moral law to a particular case was not clear" (21). Moral dilemmas plagued the souls of devotees as well as those of confessors: in the rapidly evolving post-Trent world, scruples and doubts multiplied as the economy grew more complicated than ever, science posed new challenges, and the increasingly connected world offered Europeans novelties affecting their everyday lives (for example, their diets). Probabilism was an attempt to embrace uncertainty; it was "the tool that Catholic theologians, confessors, princes, and common people needed to make sense of a world that had started to change at an intensely rapid pace and that had become less and less understandable by means of traditional doctrine" (356).

Tutino's conclusion sums up the main challenges of the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries: the new absolutistic states, the diversity fostered by exploratory travels, missionary work, and colonialism, and a new global economy. Uncertainty was an everyday companion in this global world whether you chose to sip a cup of chocolate or, less likely, to taste an iguana, because it was not clear whether chocolate was food or beverage or whether an iguana was fish or meat. Though such choices seem relatively unimportant, they could cause a person to break the rules regarding fasting and therefore commit a mortal sin. Probabilism offered an escape from this impasse by finding plausible reasons to maintain that chocolate was a beverage and iguana a fish and, therefore, that it was safe to drink or eat them on fasting days.

Tutino's book contributes to the complication of the picture of probabilism. She demonstrates that probabilism was not merely an instrument elaborated by the Jesuits to promote moral laxism and later strenuously rejected by rigorous French Jansenists, as the *vulgata* goes. Tutino brilliantly explores the conflicts within the Jesuit order concerning the doctrine of probabilism in a chapter that analyzes the revealing case of the Jesuit Alberto de Albertis (1593–1676). De Albertis' treatise *Trutina opinionum moralium* (later changed to *Lucubratio … de recta operandi regula*) was ready for publication by the end of the 1640s. Though submitted for revisions, corrections and, eventually, approval, the work never saw the light of day. For three decades Alberto's superiors asked him to revise and correct his treatise since "a number of members of the Society [of Jesus] felt uneasy with the philosophical and argumentative structure of Alberto's book and with probabilism more generally" (293). In a moment when probabilism was under attack by French rigorists, for political reasons the Roman Curia attempted to balance internal and external political forces and the Jesuits attempted to be prudent about their theological doctrine.

Predictably, probabilism crossed paths with seventeenth-century scientific renewal. When it did, it allowed moral theology to adapt quickly to scientific developments. For example, Spanish theologian Juan Caramuel (1606–1682) in his *Theologia moralis* dealt with Copernicanism and reached the original conclusion that the Church had the theological authority to condemn Copernicanism, but not "the epistemological authority to render it improbable" (180). Therefore, Caramuel asserted that natural philosophers could not be forbidden to believe in Copernicanism, at least privately. Another example of how probabilism allowed moral theology to adapt quickly to new scientific developments is provided by the problem of baptizing fetuses. Traditional doctrine maintained that it took forty days "for the fetus to become animated" (327). In the 1620s and 1630s, two new theories appeared that challenged this traditional view. Thomas Fyens (1567–1631) suggested that a fetus was animated — and therefore received a soul — three days after conception. Jan Marek Marci (1595–1667) instead maintained that as long as the fetus remained in the mother's womb it would not "receive the immortal soul" (329). Both of these theories had momentous consequences for the issues of abortion and baptism, yet Caramuel deemed them both probable, leaving believers the freedom to choose whichever they preferred. However, Roman censors understood these theories' dangers. For example, if fetuses did not receive a soul as long as they were in their mothers' wombs, then "unborn fetuses of pregnant women who are killed for their faith" (333) could no longer be venerated as martyrs. Besides, these theories made the question of abortion legally problematic: in principle, abortion was either forbidden or allowable at any stage of pregnancy since the fetus had no soul.

The baptism of babies who were at risk of dying immediately after birth also became a thorny issue. It was important to determine when a fetus received its soul because the issue of baptism was becoming more and more pressing and baptizing dead flesh was sacrilegious. New theories challenged the forty-day threshold and, for this reason, Girolamo Fiorentini (1602–1678, a member of the Clerics Regular of the Mother of God) tackled the issue by resorting to probabilistic theory. Fiorentini reasoned that since they did not know what happened in the womb, and since it was probable that animation "could occur at any point during the pregnancy" (336), it was always safe for a priest to baptize a fetus. Curiously, this solution was highly praised by Miguel de Alcántara, one of the Roman censors reviewing Caramuel's *Theologia moralis* and who disagreed with Caramuel's endorsement of the new theories on animation. Alcántara believed that Fiorentini had successfully used probable opinions to advance "a doctrine that was simultaneously novel, theologically orthodox, argumentatively solid, and consequently also legitimate to follow in practice" (338). Tutino rightly notes that Alcántara's take on Caramuel and Fiorentini's interpretations sheds light on "the epistemological significance and theological implications of probabilism" (338). While Caramuel had challenged the traditional approach to abortion and its "solid legislative, theological, and exegetical foundations" (338), Fiorentini had combined probable opinions with new scientific theories to chart the partially unknown territory of infant baptism.

This episode sums up the contradictions of probabilism, the ambiguous attitude that the Roman Church adopted toward it, and its potentialities. Far from being a liability, uncertainty could become and, indeed, became the privileged tool to map new lands, to adjust Christianity to the challenges of a global world, and to soothe the anxieties of devotees shaken by decades of drastic political, religious, scientific, and cultural changes.

If the tools employed to build probabilism were ancient, from traditional theology to Cicero's category of *prudentia* to Aristotle's theories on the role of the probable as elaborated in the *Topics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (and, one may add, the scholastic category of "probable certainty"), the results were shockingly new and laden with philosophical, ethical, and cultural consequences. We should consider the growing weight of probable opinions in the early modern world against the backdrop of the evolution of belief as described by Shagan: it does not seem risky to see in the probable opinions discussed by early modern moral theologians the same blurring of boundaries between opinion, belief, and knowledge seen in Shagan's reconstruction. In other words, "opinion" seems to be a real building block of modern culture. It is somewhat regrettable that in his otherwise excellent book, Shagan did not include a discussion of probabilism: the notion of "probable opinion" would have fit very well in his reconstruction of the evolution of the category of "belief" into that of "opinion" (although, one must recall, "probable opinion" meant "an opinion that can be proven," not a subjective idea of what a given fact could mean).

If there is a thread connecting the books reviewed here, we may find it in the influence that doubt and uncertainty have exerted on the construction of our present-day culture. As Tutino, Ryrie, and Shagan all suggest, though to different degrees, the challenges prompted by uncertainty — circularly causing further uncertainty — still resonate with our experiences. In his conclusion, Shagan stresses the proliferation of belief in modern society. Although today belief is no longer organized and policed as it was in the Middle Ages or in the early modern period, we witness a sort of "second-order consensus" (289), the belief that everyone is entitled to their own beliefs. Shagan recognizes the risks and benefits inherent in this approach, namely:

> … the rights of subjects to formally equal beliefs on every topic from physics to philosophy, regardless of their ignorance; and the rights of subjects to sift and choose which facts to believe, even alternative facts … But it also enables peace in a diverse society. (291)

The afterlife of Ryrie's story also unfolds in our time, when belief is overwhelming but disconnected from religion. Ryrie clearly sketches the process that brought us here:

> As their [i.e. of Protestant doubters, but I would say of doubters in general] anxieties dissolved one certainty after another, they were left with nothing except their commitment to their moral vision … detachable from the Christian tradition itself. They turned that moral intuition against the tradition that had taught it to them, criticising Christianity for its failure to embody the ethics of Jesus Christ. (182)

This modern detachment of moral vision from confessional faith is probably the legacy of early modern doubt. Ryrie calls it a new form of secularization, a new humanism based on "gender and racial equality, sexual freedom, a strong doctrine of individual human rights, a sharp distinction between the human and non-human realms" (202). Where did this new humanism come from? Ryrie suggests it sprang from the foundation myth of our time: the Second World War and Nazism. This experience set the bar for what is morally acceptable and defined a new ethic outside of the confessional realm. More than believing in God's goodness, now we believe in Nazism's cruelty and support what Nazism denied.

Modern Western society may have lost the perception of the risks inherent to belief or doubt: wrong, lukewarm, or idiosyncratic belief and doubt no longer trigger the "spiritual turmoil" described by Shagan and Ryrie. However, we have learned the risks of belief in "alternative" facts and the political use of doubt (for example, when directed against scientific or historical narratives). The origins of our ideas about the uses of belief and doubt lay in the early modern period, and these three volumes give us exemplary tools to understand them and their long-lasting effects.

Shagan's archeology of the notion of "belief"; Ryrie's use of the history of emotions in the study of doubt; Tutino's exploration of the often-surprising world of probabilism: each of these approaches offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of early modern culture and of the place of uncertainty therein. Taken together, they suggest that the time is ripe for re-instating uncertainty and doubt in their place in European culture. Long before the decades that shaped, in Paul Hazard's famous 1935 definition, "the crisis of the European mind," doubt was carving its way through European consciences on several levels. As a scholar working on the cultural history of doubt in early modern Italy, I cannot but welcome these publications. Although I am pursuing a partially different trajectory in my own research (connected with issues of iconography, sociability, the print market, etc.), many of the questions discussed in these books are fundamental for my own work. These volumes succeed in showing how early modern discussions of belief, unbelief, doubt, and probability, exerted a real and powerful impact on everyday life. Understanding how early modern Europeans reacted to these powerful changes to their mental landscape may teach us useful lessons on how to handle our own uncertainty.

Note

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