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The Birth of Modern Belief is seriously good. It is erudite, insightful, and cogent; but, above all, it enables us to think hard about the relationship between our past and our present. This is no mean feat in an age when ‘consensual knowledge of the past dwindles in inverse proportion to how much is known in toto’.(1) The form and content of the book may well divide opinion amongst historians. However, for the most part, this will be grist to the mill for a work that argues that ‘in the modern West belief has effectively become a synonym for opinion or judgement: a space of autonomy rather than a prescription for its exercise’ (p. 6). Here, Ethan Shagan the historian has been elevated by Ethan Shagan the essayist.

The book is premised on a professional credo that ‘the purpose of history as a discipline is to explain change over time’ (p. 27). A deceptively simple observation—that belief has a history—forms the basis of an essay on the problem, rather than a comprehensive study of a thing. The issue at hand concerns a demonstrable shift in the character of belief as a function of epistemology: an historical transformation from a pre-modern European condition in which ‘Christians routinely denied that other people’s claims were beliefs at all’ to a modern western situation whereby people ‘believe vastly different things’ whilst being generally accepting of the ‘epistemic status of one another’s beliefs as beliefs’ (p. 10). Here, the essay works to complement Kuhn’s sense of ‘paradigm’ and Foucault’s notion of ‘episteme’ with Shagan’s construct of ‘credulity’, that is to say a ‘matrix of interpretation’ which incorporates those historically contingent ‘spaces or conditions of believing’ that shape ‘religious knowledge and its relationship to other truth claims’ (pp. 282–3). This nondogmatic framework allows for a ‘history of ideas’ (p. 26), which illuminates how religious belief has operated with respect to knowledge and opinion through medieval, confessional, and modern epochs.

Medieval ‘belief mitigated the potential hubris that adhered in every attempt to approach God, not just because it was biblically sanctioned... but because it was amphibious, a kind of knowledge-claim without implying knowledge’ (p. 33). A protean rationalist tradition anchored in the interventions of St Augustine pondered a symbiotic relationship between belief and knowledge. Various strains of polemical apologia tended to consider belief as an alternative to understanding, whilst mystical theology gave rise to the suggestion of John Ruysbroeck (1293–1381) that ‘we should believe the articles of faith, and not desire to understand them’ (p. 42). These abstract concerns were brought into stark relief by the ways in which ‘religious belief was in constant danger of collapsing back into its profane homonym, haunted by the secular knowledge-claims from which it sought to separate itself’ (p. 44). Thomistic scholasticism disaggregated the demonstrable knowledge of ‘science’, the lack of certain judgement of ‘opinion’, and the ‘act of believing’ (p. 44–6). The object of belief may have been the infallible authority God but bearing true witness to such a principle was invariably premised upon obedience to the Church. ‘Augustine used the preposition
“in” to differentiate ordinary propositional assent from genuine Christian commitment’ (p. 50). To make matters more challenging, medieval theology was far from settled upon whether communicants ought to believe the Church or believe in it. Furthermore, heretics, pagans, Jews, and Muslims could be deemed believers of things, but the objects of their religious beliefs rendered them unbelievers of God in the eyes of Christians. Whilst the ‘medieval category of belief was baggy... the Christian Middle Ages were almost wholly innocent of the notion that “belief” consisted in a person’s individual views on religion’ (p. 62).

The Reformations of the 16th century were premised on ‘a rupture in European ideas: the reformation of belief’ (p. 66). Evangelicals denounced the Church of Rome and its history as the product of debased epistemology and articulated the ‘scandalous’ idea that ‘unbelief rather than belief’ was the ‘normal or default position of a sinful world’ (p. 66 and p. 69: Cf. John 1:8 and Romans 1:19–25). In a quest for true knowledge and sincere belief, Protestants found themselves in the bind of having to synthesize ‘belief as forensic creedalism and belief as absolute trust’ whilst Catholics sought to re-affirm their position by ‘identifying belief with obedience to the authority of the Church’ (p. 77). In both cases, belief became harder to action and more reliant upon the kind of catechesis that engendered confessional uniformity. Dissent spawned ‘species of unbelief’ (p. 87).

Reformation created a bear pit for religious controversy wherein ‘the logic of atheism—all the myriad arguments by which wrong believers or insufficient believers could be denounced as unbelievers—carried daunting corollaries and implications’ that committed both Catholics and Protestants to ‘versions of belief so harsh and unyielding as to be unsustainable’ (p. 100). ‘By privileging the starkest and most unforgiving interpretations of what it meant to believe, polemists were able to transcend the argument that the ungodly were like atheists, and reach the conclusion that they were, or for practical purposes could be considered, atheists indeed’ (p. 122).

The Protestant doctrine of assurance and the Catholic commitment to obedience racked Christian souls with the ‘unbearable weight of believing’ (pp. 129–165: a dazzling interpretative allusion to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Milan Kundera that deserves a separate essay). Calvin insisted that ‘believers have a perpetual struggle with their own distrust’ whilst also acknowledging that ‘the reprobate believe God to be propitious to them’ (p. 136 and p. 137). Forcing ‘Christians to recognize their own depravity as a condition of their apotheosis’ was difficult to bear (p. 140). Francesco Spiera (1502–1548) suffered the Inquisition for moving from Catholicism to Protestantism before slighting both at his deathbed conversion to unbelief. Hannah Allen (c.1638–1668x1708) became so convinced of her wretched spiritual hypocrisy that she tried to commit suicide at least a dozen times. For Catholics, any ecstasy of having one’s belief informed through spiritual experience was tempered
by the agony of only being able to own beliefs that had been officially sanctioned by the Church: a most terrible predicament that was exemplified in the life and writing of St Teresa of Avila (1515–1582).

As the Reformation imagination became a fertile place for heterodox ideas to flourish so Europe experienced the ‘birth pangs of modern belief’ (pp. 166–206: a phrase which appears to signal an intriguing manoeuvre in post-confessional historiography when contrasted with Patrick Collinson’s *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* [1988]). Montaigne may have re-envisioned Pyrrhonist scepticism but more daring visions of ‘how human judgement might constitute Christian belief’ (p. 175) were advanced by the Italian Dominican philosopher Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), the Flemish proto-Arminian philologist Jan van Driesche (1550–1616), and English Arminian theologian Thomas Jackson (1578–1640). ‘The centrepiece of this new project was the rehabilitation by Protestants of *fides historica*, or historical faith: intellectual assent to the factual matter of Christianity, the stories and doctrines of the bible, came to be accounted authentic Christian belief’ (pp. 185–6). In a definitive twist to proceedings, an Arminian appreciation of the Socinian arguments about biblical history combined with a rejection of that dogmatic belief orchestrated by the Church to present ‘the individual, propositional, *historical* judgement of Christians… [as] the essence of faith’ (p. 191). Intriguingly, this shift towards ‘probable belief, based upon the judicious weighing of evidence’ was not limited to a heterodox avant-garde for it was also of considerable use to Jesuit missionaries as indigenous peoples had to be ‘convinced to believe through reason and experience’ in a way that reworked some of the basic principles of ‘the Counter-Reformation’ (p. 194 and 199).

‘Enlightened belief’ was all about the ways in which the ‘collapse of the boundaries between belief, knowledge, and opinion structured the emergence of modernity in which belief, far from declining, flourished and proliferated, colonizing the natural sciences and the science of man’ (p. 249). Descartes may have made ‘belief a resource of the self rather than an artefact of doctrine’ and ‘raised the possibility for Christian belief to transcend theology’ but his *a priori* reasoning also blurred ‘the distinction between belief and knowledge upon which so many of his predecessors had insisted’ (pp. 210–11). This intervention marked the beginning of a wider debate about the nature and import of rationalism. Here, Jansenism promoted a ‘*structure of discernment*’ whereby ‘reason’ adjudicated upon conflicting beliefs; whilst Spinozism advanced a ‘*principal of construction*’ which set ‘reason’ as constituent of belief and the ‘goal which belief seeks’ (p. 217). By contrast, an appreciation of belief as underpinned by empirical understanding was reformulating the relationship between belief and opinion. Robert Boyle (1627–1691) ‘repeatedly accorded parallel status to “believing” the results of scientific experiment and “believing” the results of religious speculation’ (p. 229). John Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) dismissed ‘any idea that “believing in” was stronger or different from
mere belief’, so that to ‘believe in Christ is simply to believe that Jesus was the Messiah’ etc. (p. 226). For David Hume (1711–1776), belief was ‘simply the strong and present idea of one thing that we conceive when confronted by something else’ (p. 234). Much of Pierre Bayle’s scepticism was ‘actually a novel configuration of belief, now based upon judgement and offered partially and conditionally rather than absolutely’ (p. 241). Such advances were complemented by ‘reimagining the products of human imagination not merely as secondary harvests of nature or providence but as worthwhile and independent objects of judgement’; and, crucially, this gave rise to ‘instrumental belief’ which acknowledged that ‘in the social world, human belief changes the very things on which it passes judgment’ (p. 255). The world of mathematics succumbed to the allure of belief when Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s (1646–1716) consideration of imaginary numbers showed that ‘there is room even for inventions of the human imagination to serve the higher truths of mathematics’ (p. 262). As the age of Romanticism dawned, William Blake (1757–1827) attested to belief as a creative process. Indeed, Blake stood for ‘a broad swath of post-Enlightenment thinking that was enthusiastic, mystical, or anti-rationalist, but whose understanding of “belief” was utterly dependent upon the success of the Enlightenment project to redefine belief as individual sovereign freedom against the gathering forces of orthodoxy’ (p.280).

‘We live today within the legacy of this innovation, this convergence between, on the one hand, belief as a point of contact with the divine, and on the other hand, belief as an act of human imagination’ (p. 281). The point, then, is that ‘far from belief having declined, belief in Western society has proliferated, escaping the bounds that enclosed it in the past, colonizing neighbouring epistemic categories, so that now belief is everywhere. Secularization has not segregated belief from the world, it has instead opened the world to belief, liberating it from the demands Christianity placed upon it’ (p.293)

The Birth of Modern Belief is a stunning achievement: its principal arguments are intuitive and yet intellectually electrifying. There could hardly be a more captivating and provocative response to our collective ignorance about the history of belief. Shagan does an outstanding job of correcting the stereotypical misapprehensions about belief construed by Secularists and Christians, Catholics and Protestants, within and without academe. The metanarrative of the decline of belief is dead. Those who assume that belief is somehow ahistorical or transhistorical must now acquiesce to the history of belief. Those who seek to critique modern secularism in terms of the legacy of the Reformation must now equally take heed. More pointedly, Shagan puts pay to Brad Gregory’s thesis about the rise of ‘hyperpluralism’ and self-consciously opens up a critical dialogue with Robert Bellah’s Beyond Belief (1970) and Michael Gillespie’s The Theological Origins of Modernity (2008); there is even a dalliance with Salvoj Žižek’s On Belief (2001). Orienting the history of belief around a striking new vision of the Enlightenment project is
inspired. The book draws together a mighty range of primary sources. Indeed, the creative juxtapositions of the sources not only provide fresh insight but deftly integrate works that typically get typecast as being mainly applicable to isolated histories of Religion or Science, Catholicism or Protestantism, Reformation or Enlightenment. Here, Shagan’s sweeping vision builds upon and complements a host of acclaimed specialist works including, amongst others: John Arnold’s *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (2005); Berndt Hamm’s *The Reformation of Faith...* (2004); Susan Schreiner’s *Are you Alone Wise* (2011); Stefania Tutino’s *Uncertainty in Post-Reformation Catholicism* (2018); Barbara Shapiro’s *A Culture of Fact* (2000); Nicholas Popper’s *Walter Raleigh’s History of the World...* (2012); *God in the Enlightenment* co-edited by William Bulman and Robert Ingram (2016); Teressa Bejan’s *Mere Civility* (2017); and *Invisible Hands* co-authored by Dror Wahrman and Jonathan Sheehan.

*The Birth of Modern Belief* is at once exemplary and experimental. A learned reading of historical texts and phenomena gives way to a most formidable mode of argumentation; yet, taken in the round, the book is shot through with evaluative impulses that appear playful, probing, and programmatic. All this gives readers a wonderful, if somewhat daunting, opportunity to wrestle with Shagan’s *foci*, methods, arguments, themes, and conclusions. For this reviewer, there are at least three bones of contention.

One: *The Birth of Modern Belief* relies upon and re-affirms a prescribed approach to periodisation. The point at issue here is subtly different from the one that is pre-emptively swept aside in the book’s introduction. Parts of the work are ‘unabashedly teleological’—or rather present-centred—in the sense that they aim at considering our present from a long historical perspective (p. 27). In being duty-bound to understand change over time the book places an ‘emphasis on strands of thought that signal the most significant transformations’ whilst acknowledging the twofold truism that ‘change happens slowly and unevenly’ and the historical ‘rise of one thing does not entail the fall of everything else’ (p. 27). All this is fair enough. There is, however, a potential niggle when a history of ideas over the *longue durée* is presented through the period-specific step-change from ‘Reformation’ to ‘Enlightenment’, from ‘pre-modernity’ to ‘modernity’. (2) The crux of the matter concerns a trade-off between synchronic and diachronic modes of historical contextualisation and how our scholarly methods are typically much more robust on the former than the later. Set against the contrast between Quentin Skinner’s methodological attack on the history of ideas and David Armitage’s recent model of transtemporal history, does *The Birth of Modern Belief* select and contextualise its primary sources in ways that are preconditioned to assess the historical change it wants to identify and explain? (3) Allied to this, it would be worth exploring how the book seems to blend methodological proclivities that are borne of both postmodernist and modernist historiographical traditions. Whatever the
case, the remarkable work Dmitri Levitin has recently set 17th-century philosophical texts in their institutional and disciplinary contexts in ways that make it much harder for historians to claim that ‘Enlightened Belief’ serves as a label for a particular historical phenomenon that advanced ‘modernity’. (4)

Two: The Birth of Modern Belief is rather coy when it comes to the historical interplay between belief and being. There are some suggestive comments that gesture towards matters of ontology; however, for the most part, the book may be said to offer a political history of epistemology in a way that resonates with Ferdinand Tönnies’s model of an historical shift from ‘community’ to ‘society’. In his 1960 Gifford Lectures on Belief, H. H. Price argued that ‘belief in God’ retains a mark of distinction above other self-interested and disinterested belief-in phenomena in a way that is analogous to ‘belief in a friend’. (5) This contention holds out for a significant, albeit limited, hierarchy in the substance of belief, so as to resist the conclusion that ‘modern belief leaves little or no room for claims that one kind of belief is qualitatively superior to another’ (p. 289). The potential implications for such an alternative view may be thickened up with a few points of conjecture. Augustine’s formulation of believing in/into Christ was, at its most fundamental, an expression of the spiritual metaphysics of conversion unto God in Trinity. The history of the devotio moderna raises complex questions about the tension between divine knowledge and knowledge of the divine at the intersection of ‘Medieval’ and ‘Reformation’ worlds (not to mention the rhetorical deployment of the concept-term ‘modern’). The doctrine of prevenient grace may have freed up English Arminians to promote belief as a human judgement, but it would be worth exploring the extent which their experiential exploits remained subordinate to a post-Calvinist covenant theology. 18th century advances in public discourse promoted a nexus between belief and propaganda that qualified and yet also consolidated the power of confessional beliefs within the political economy. Catholicism and Protestantism were reborn as national and international identities, which in turn sparked an ontological impulse to believe in a history that connected an individual’s present to a collective past. Responding to the threat or actual occurrence of disestablishment, institutional Christianity consciously and subconscious withdrew from the metaphysical arena. Christian spirituality and secular metaphysics were rethought in popular and elite engagements with art, literature, and the natural world, until the sacred and profane became largely indistinguishable to undiscerning souls; however, ontology did not disappear. Indeed, the question of ‘who are we?’ is the great political question of our time, and it is essentially about what we believe’ rather than what we mean by believe. (6)

Three: For a work that gives its very last endnote to citing Žižek, The Birth of Modern Belief appears strangely sanguine: ‘in modernity, belief is the space in which rival claims subsist as commensurate alternatives, [...] creating the conditions for peace in a diverse society’ (p. 10). Whilst
Christianity may have lost its theological and philosophical capacity to present one set of beliefs as epistemologically superior to others, its cultural legacy may still insist that we play the games of epistemic controversy with its loaded dice. Here, the interesting thing about the modern western condition is not its propensity to individualism but rather a failure of its representative democracy to suitably assuage the asymmetry of power between elite and popular agency. A transtemporal history of Christianity shows how it has spent the best part of two thousand years forging both argumentation and description as essential tools with which to undertake epistemic labour; and, now, the former reflects and gives further expression to the ‘cultural capital’ of learned liberal elites whilst the latter supports an antithetical impulse that seemingly appropriates the ‘artless proof’ of testimony to give power to the opinions and propaganda of non-elites. In the 2010s, the arguments that allowed those who believe in liberal democracy to hold authority and power came crashing down under the weight of a populism that mobilised the Others excluded by liberal democracy. If beliefs have become opinions, then plenty of people now think that the learned arguments that underpin western values are nothing but opinions too. Those who try and win such people round by insisting upon the efficacy of polite, reasoned exposition and evidence-based argument may be on a hiding to nothing. As the last veterans of World War Two pass on, one centre-right poll in the United Kingdom recently suggested that “among 25–34 year olds, 36% support army rule; 66% favour strongman leaders; and 26% believe democracy is a bad way to run the country.” Here, commentators have begun to ruminate on a shift of political principle from ‘freedom’ to ‘belonging’. There is, however, perhaps something to be said for discussing this phenomenon in terms of the decline of liberal freedom, with its emphasis on privatised belief, and a rise in the call for a radical freedom premised on orientating belief around a public ontological imperative. For Žižek the atheist, beliefs of all kinds and about all things are little more than a tortured web of illusion that upholds the myth of ‘formal freedom’; yet, for Žižek the post-Marxist, belief induced by Christian revelation is a sort of prototype for the only process that can initiate the conversion to ‘actual freedom’. The multifaceted quest for belonging that is now savaging western liberalism no more reflects Žižek’s idiosyncratic philosophy than it pre-empts a return to credal theology; that said, it illuminates that a belief in struggle holds a powerful allure. The battles for peaceful freedom in diversity may have been—and are still—just the antithesis of freedom in diversity now looms large and it, too, battles for its sense of justice, nay salvation. And, to further complicate things, an unintended consequence of The Birth of Modern Belief, even if only by implication, is a risk of presenting ‘modern belief’—the space that allows multiculturalism to thrive—as somehow bequeathed to the western world by an Enlightenment project crafted by ‘great’ white men, to the detriment of those that bore witness to struggles for equality and inclusion. Did ‘modern belief’ ever really level the epistemological superiority of a belief in martyrdom? Is ‘modern belief’ coming to an end? Is ‘modern belief’ a liberal illusion? Or does
‘modern belief’ exist at the interchange between discovery and invention in a way that calls on us to actively believe in modern belief?

If these points have any merit, then they, hopefully, emerge through a critical dialogue with The Birth of Modern Belief in a way that serves as testament to the book’s originality and significance. Shagan invites us to believe in the academic study of history; of that there is no doubt.

Notes