



Why I am an Unbeliever Carl Van Doren

Let us be honest. There have always been men and women without the gift of faith. They lack it, do not desire it, and would not know what to do with it if they had it. They are apparently no less intelligent than the faithful, and apparently no less virtuous. How great the number of them is it would be difficult to say, but they exist in all communities and are most numerous where there is most enlightenment. As they have no organization and no creed, they can of course have no official spokesman. Nevertheless, any one of them who speaks out can be trusted to speak, in a way, for all of them. Like the mystics, the unbelievers, wherever found, are essentially of one spirit and one language. I cannot, however, pretend to represent more than a single complexion of unbelief.

The very terms which I am forced to use put me at the outset in a trying position. Belief, being first in the field, naturally took a positive term for itself and gave a negative term to unbelief. As an unbeliever, I am therefore obliged to seem merely to dissent from the believers, no matter how much more I may do. Actually I do more. What they call unbelief, I call belief. Doubtless I was born to it, but I have tested it with reading and speculation, and I hold it firmly. What I have referred to as the gift of faith I do not, to be exact, regard as a gift. I regard it, rather, as a survival from an earlier stage of thinking and feeling: in short, as a form of superstition. It, and not the thing I am forced to name unbelief, seems to me negative. It denies the reason. It denies the evidences in the case, in the sense that it insists upon introducing elements which come not from the facts as shown but from the imaginations and wishes of mortals. Unbelief does not deny the reason and it sticks as closely as it can to the evidences.

I shall have to be more explicit. When I say I am an unbeliever, I do not mean merely that I am no Mormon or no Methodist, or even that I am no Christian or no Buddhist. These seem to me relatively unimportant divisions and subdivisions of belief. I mean that I do not believe in any god that has ever been devised, in any doctrine that has ever claimed to be revealed, in any scheme of immortality that has ever been expounded.

As to gods, they have been, I find, countless, but even the names of most of them lie in the deep compost which is known as civilization, and the memories of few of them are green. There does not seem to me to be good reason for holding that some of them are false and some of them, or one of them, true. Each was created by the imaginations and wishes of men who could not account for the behavior of the universe ~ in any other satisfactory way. But no god has satisfied his worshipers forever. Sooner or later they have realized that the attributes once ascribed to him, such as selfishness or lustfulness or vengefulness, are unworthy of the moral systems which men have evolved among themselves. Thereupon follows the gradual doom of the god, however long certain of the faithful may cling to his cult. In the case of the god who still survives in the loyalty of men after centuries of scrutiny, it can always be noted that little besides his name has endured. His attributes will have been so revised that he is really another god. Nor is this objection met by the argument that the concept of the god has been purified while the essence of him survived. In the concept alone can he be studied; the essence eludes the grasp of the human mind. I may

prefer among the various gods that god who seems to me most thoroughly purged of what I regard as undivine elements, but I make my choice, obviously, upon principles which come from observation of the conduct of men. Whether a god has been created in the image of gross desires or of pure desires does not greatly matter. The difference proves merely that different men have desired gods and have furnished themselves with the gods they were able to conceive. Behind all their conceptions still lies the abyss of ignorance. There is no trustworthy evidence as to a gods absolute existence.

Nor does the thing called revelation, as I see it, carry the proof further. All the prophets swear that a god speaks through them, and yet they prophesy contradictions. Once more, men must choose in accordance with their own principles. That a revelation was announced long ago makes it difficult to examine, but does not otherwise attest its soundness. That some revealed doctrine has lasted for ages and has met the needs of many generations proves that it is the kind of doctrine which endures and satisfies, but not that it is divine. Secular doctrines which turned out to be perfectly false have also endured and satisfied. If belief in a god has to proceed from the assumption that he exists, belief in revelation has first to proceed from the assumption that a god exists and then to go further to the assumption that he communicates his will to certain men. But both are mere assumptions. Neither is, in the present state of knowledge, at all capable of proof. Suppose a god did exist, and suppose he did communicate his will to any of his creatures. What man among them could comprehend that language? What man could take that dictation? And what man could overwhelmingly persuade his fellows that he had been selected and that they must accept him as authentic? The best they could do would be to have faith in two assumptions and to test the revealed will by its correspondence to their imaginations and wishes. At this point it may be contended that revelation must be real because it arouses so much response in so many human bosoms. This does not follow without a leap of the reason into the realm of hypothesis. Nothing is proved by this general response except that men are everywhere very much alike. They have the same members, the same organs, the same glands, in varying degrees of activity. Being so much alike, they tend to agree upon a few primary desires. Physical and social conditions brings about a general similarity in prophecies.

One desire by which the human mind is often teased is the desire to live after death. It is not difficult to explain. Men live so briefly that their plans far outrun their ability to execute them. They see themselves cut off before their will to live is exhausted. Naturally enough, they wish to survive, and, being men, believe in their chances for survival. But their wishes afford no possible proof. Life covers the earth with wishes, as it covers the earth with plants and animals. No wish, however, is evidence of anything beyond itself. Let millions hold it, and it is still only a wish. Let each separate race exhibit it, and it is still only a wish. Let the wisest hold it as strongly as the foolishest, and it is still only a wish. Whoever says he knows that immortality is a fact is merely hoping that it is. And whoever argues, as men often do, that life would be meaningless without immortality because it alone brings justice into human fate, must first argue, as no man has ever quite convincingly done, that life has an unmistakable meaning and that it is just. I, at least, am convinced on neither of these two points. Though I am, I believe, familiar with all the arguments, I do not find any of them notably better than the others. All I see is that the wish for immortality is wide-spread, that certain schemes of immortality imagined from it have here or there proved more agreeable than rival schemes, and that they have been more generally accepted. The religions which provide these successful schemes I can credit with keener insight into human wishes than other religions have had, but I cannot credit them with greater authority as regards the truth. They are all guesswork.

That I think thus about gods, revelation, and immortality ought to be sufficient answer to the question why I am an unbeliever. It would be if the question were always reasonably

asked, but it is not. There is also an emotional aspect to be considered. Many believers, I am told, have the same doubts, and yet have the knack of putting their doubts to sleep and entering ardently into the communion of the faithful. The process is incomprehensible to me. So far as I understand it, such believers are moved by their desires to the extent of letting them rule not only their conduct but their thoughts. An unbeliever's desires have, apparently, less power over his reason. Perhaps this is only another way of saying that his strongest desire is to be as reasonable as he can. However the condition be interpreted, the consequence is the same. An honest unbeliever can no more make himself believe against his reason than he can make himself free of the pull of gravitation. For myself, I feel no obligation whatever to believe. I might once have felt it prudent to keep silence, for I perceive that the race of men, while sheep in credulity, are wolves for conformity; but just now, happily, in this breathing-spell of toleration, there are so many varieties of belief that even an unbeliever may speak out.

In so doing I must answer certain secondary questions which unbelievers are often asked. Does it not persuade me, one question runs, to realize that many learned men have pondered upon supernatural matters and have been won over to belief? I answer, not in the least. With respect to the gods, revelation, and immortality no man is enough more learned than his fellows to have the right to insist that they follow him into the regions about which all men are ignorant. I am not a particle more impressed by some good old man's conviction that he is in the confidence of the gods than I am by any boy's conviction that there are fish in the horse-pond from which no fish has ever been taken. Does it not impress me to see some good old woman serene in the faith of a blessed immortality? No more than it impresses me to see a little girl full of trust in the universal munificence of a Christmas saint. Am I not moved by the spectacle of a great tradition of worship which has broadened out over continents and which brings all its worshipers punctually together in the observance of noble and dignified rites? Yes, but I am moved precisely by that as I am moved by the spectacle of men everywhere putting their seed seasonably in the ground, tending its increase, and patiently gathering in their harvests.

Finally, do I never suspect in myself some moral obliquity, or do I not at least regret the bleak outlook of unbelief? On these points I am, in my own mind, as secure as I know how to be. There is no moral obligation to believe what is unbelievable, any more than there is a moral obligation to do what is undoable. Even in religion, honesty is a virtue. Obliquity, I should say, shows itself rather in prudent pretense or in voluntary self-delusion. Furthermore, the unbelievers have, as I read history, done less harm to the world than the believers. They have not filled it with savage wars or snarled casuistries, with crusades or persecutions, with complacency or ignorance. They have, instead, done what they could to fill it with knowledge and beauty, with temperance and justice, with manners and laughter. They have numbered among themselves some of the most distinguished specimens of mankind. And when they have been undistinguished, they have surely not been inferior to the believers in the fine art of minding their own affairs and so of enlarging the territories of peace.

Nor is the outlook of unbelief, to my way of thinking, a bleak one. It is merely rooted in courage and not in fear. Belief is still in the plight of those ancient races who out of a lack of knowledge peopled the forest with satyrs and the sea with ominous monsters and the ends of the earth with misshapen anthropophagi. So the pessimists among believers have peopled the void with witches and devils, and the optimists among them have peopled it with angels and gods. Both alike have been afraid to furnish the house of life simply. They have cluttered it with the furniture of faith. Much of this furniture, the most reasonable unbeliever would never think of denying, is very beautiful. There are breathing myths, there are comforting legends, there are consoling hopes. But they have, as the unbeliever

sees them, no authority beyond that of poetry. That is, they may captivate if they can, but they have no right to insist upon conquering. Beliefs, like tastes, may differ. The unbelievers taste and belief are austere. In the wilderness of worlds he does not yield to the temptation to belittle the others by magnifying his own. Among the dangers of chance he does not look for safety to any watchful providence whose special concern he imagines he is. Though he knows that knowledge is imperfect, he trusts it alone. If he takes, therefore, the less delight in metaphysics, he takes the more in physics. Each discovery of a new truth brings him a vivid joy. He builds himself up, so far as he can, upon truth, and barricades himself with it. Thus doing, he never sags into superstition, but grows steadily more robust and blithe in his courage. However many fears he may prove unable to escape, he does not multiply them in his imagination and then combat them with his wishes. Austerity may be simplicity and not bleakness.

Does the unbeliever lack certain of the gentler virtues of the believer, the quiet confidence, the unquestioning obedience? He may, yet it must always be remembered that the greatest believers are the greatest tyrants. If the freedom rather than the tyranny of faith is to better the world, then the betterment lies in the hands, I think, of the unbelievers. At any rate, I take my stand with them.

Carl Van Doren. *Why I Am an Unbeliever*. Twelve Modern Apostles and Their Creeds. New York: Duffield, 1926.

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