

INTRODUCTION

THE MAKING OF THE VILLAGE ATHEIST

“OURS IS A LAND WHERE PEOPLE OUGHT TO BE RELIGIOUS,” a Minneapolis newspaper opined with prescriptive assurance as Easter Sunday neared in 1904. Faith and reverence were American bedrock, the paper avowed; from the White House down to the humblest home, religious allegiance was the norm. As the solemn observances of Holy Week unfolded across the city, the paper found it hard to imagine atheists and unbelievers ever being incorporated into American civic life on equal terms: “We claim religious freedom for our strongest plank in [our] national foundations, but irreligious freedom is another matter entirely. Let a man believe what he likes. Let him believe, however.” That citizenship and civil liberties were somehow contingent on religious belief, that religion was to be expressly privileged over irreligion—the Minnesota paper presented these as perdurable propositions governing American public life.¹

A decade and a half later the persistence of this perception—that being irreligious was essentially un-American—sent the budding literary critic Van Wyck Brooks looking for inklings of deviance, if not deliverance. Brooks turned to Mark Twain to provide the needed relief, but found him instead complicit in the national fondness for religious faith—a dissembler all too fearful of public disapproval to give his unbelief full and frank expression. Emphasizing Twain’s self-censoring evasions and posthumous deferrals, Brooks looked beyond him to an abstracted paragon, the village atheist, as the bearer of a “vital, restless, critical, disruptive

spirit” in American cultural life. A forthright nonconformist, the village atheist offered a glimmer of intellectual independence and plainspoken dissent amid the chilling sanctimony and complacency that Brooks saw dominating the culture of his youth. “There is no type in our social history,” Brooks solemnly concluded in 1920, “more significant than that ubiquitous figure, the ‘village atheist.’”²

Brooks did not dwell on the particulars of this type. Notwithstanding his gesture toward “our social history,” his readers could easily have come away thinking that the village atheist was anything but “ubiquitous”—that, indeed, the figure consisted in little more than an isolated character or two in Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). In that novel Judge York Driscoll presides over a local Society of Freethinkers, a group that after four years in operation has exactly two members. Driscoll’s small-town Missouri household is comprised of his wife and his widowed sister, both good Presbyterians, who have the community’s approbation entirely on their side but whose piety has left the judge undeterred: he still ventures “to go his own way and follow out his own notions.”³ Behind an imagined character like Driscoll, behind the romanticized type that Brooks held up, was a culture of unbelief full of flesh-and-blood freethinkers and ungodly lecturers, all of whom confronted—with incredulity and spleen—religious claims that they were dangerously unfit for equal citizenship in an avowedly Christian nation. Theirs proved a long, contentious struggle in a country where the majority of their compatriots claimed to place much trust in God and very little in them.

The prejudice against atheists and unbelievers went deep. Even as prominent an architect of religious liberty as John Locke had been unable to imagine widening the circle of toleration enough to include the godless: “Those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the Being of God,” Locke declared in his touchstone *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689). “Promises, Covenants, and Oaths, which are the Bonds of Humane Society, can have no hold upon an Atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all.” Public order, in Locke’s view, was compatible with religious diversity—with a polity that included various kinds of

Christians, as well as Jews and Muslims—but not with overt irreligion. “Those that by their Atheism undermine and destroy all Religion,” Locke concluded, “can have no pretence of Religion,” and thus they could have no basis for claiming the “Privilege” of religious toleration. Those who rejected God were in Locke’s estimate “the most dangerous sorts of wild beasts”; they were “incapable of all society.” Such theological and political propositions carried life-and-death implications. In 1697, eight years after Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Thomas Aikenhead, a twenty-year-old student at the University of Edinburgh, was hanged for giving vent—in the company of fellow students—to a series of profane and atheistic rants against the scriptures, Jesus, Hell, and the Trinity. Aikenhead’s execution made this much plain: even as the principle of religious toleration gained traction in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britain, irreligious freedom lagged far behind.⁴

The mother country very much provided the legal template for its North American colonies: sacrilege remained criminal, and atheism anathema. Offenders who cursed in God’s name, scoffed at the scriptures, or otherwise mocked sacred things often landed in court, and the punishments meted out for such blasphemies could be severe, including public whipping, tongue-boring, and imprisonment. Though no one in the colonies was put to death for denying Christ’s divinity or rejecting God, the law nonetheless looked upon such disavowals as potentially capital offenses. In one case in Massachusetts in 1654, a soldier, Benjamin Sawser, had drunkenly pronounced that “Jehova is the Devel” and that he “knew noe god but his sworde.” As the court deliberated whether Sawser’s egregious outburst constituted a capital crime, he made a jailbreak before a final punishment could be meted out.⁵ Even when fines rather than prison sentences were at stake, religious contempt was taken quite seriously. The disorderly Elijah Leach found that out in Plymouth in 1765, when he indecently exposed himself to “divers of his majesties good subjects” and also loudly declared that he “did not care a turd for God in Heaven.” For showing off his “private members” he was fined ten shillings, but for his “irreverent speeches” he was fined forty shillings.⁶ The prevailing

legal strictures in the British colonies criminalized ungodliness in a host of ways, and such regulations—aimed at blasphemy, profane swearing, and Sabbath-breaking, among other things—kept barefaced scoffers ever susceptible to prosecution as threats to public morality. Under these constraints blatant infidels remained few and far between in British North America.

Added to the legal proscriptions on irreverence was the social impropriety of overt unbelief. A classic mid-eighteenth-century guidebook to gentlemanly manners, the Earl of Chesterfield's *Letters*, made plain the reputational norms favoring religious profession: "Depend upon this truth, That every man is the worse looked upon, and the less trusted, for being thought to have no religion; . . . a wise Atheist (if such a thing there is) would, for his own interest, and character in this world, pretend to some religion." Irreligion was not good form; it was disrespectful and indecorous; the polite gentleman knew that "the Appearances of religion" mattered acutely as a marker of public credibility; it was useful, in other words, to be seen in a prominent church pew on a Sunday.⁷ This was not a social calculus designed to make an evangelical's heart soar, but it was perhaps enough to secure the churches' hold on well-heeled parishioners and keep the infidels at bay. At the end of the century, in 1794, the revolutionary pamphleteer Thomas Paine fumed in the *Age of Reason* over the "mental lying" involved in keeping up this facade. "Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving," he argued. Rather, it consists "in professing to believe what [one] does not believe." It was time, he insisted, to stop all the posturing deference to Christianity, its scriptures, clergy, and steeple-houses, and instead to avow openly a deistic natural philosophy untethered from biblical revelation. Paine's anticlerical candor cost his American reputation dearly, so much in fact that upon his return to the United States in 1802 he looked more the social pariah than the hero patriot. The full-throated defamation of Paine's character—a vile, beastly, drunken, loathsome, atheistic rogue—only served to confirm the practical wisdom of Chesterfield's advice.⁸

Another generation later, in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville saw the same sort of social qualms reinforcing the preferment that

religious association enjoyed in the new republic. In most instances, Tocqueville thought, Americans professed “the doctrines of Christianity from a sincere belief in them,” but “a certain number,” he surmised, did so because they feared being “suspected of unbelief.” The point to Tocqueville was not how sizeable this clandestine bunch of nonbelievers was, but instead that the new nation’s social, religious, and political mores kept incredulity furtive; only an infidel few risked public rancor. Tocqueville had a tale from early in his visit in 1831 to illustrate why most skeptics found it best to keep their cards close to their chest: a witness in a New York courtroom, when called to the stand, had daringly declared that he “did not believe in the existence of God or the immortality of the soul.” The judge was dumbfounded to have discovered a living, breathing atheist anywhere, let alone in his own courtroom, and moved quickly to reestablish order. Pronouncing the United States to be “a Christian country,” the judge maintained that he had no choice but to disqualify the witness whose testimony, in light of his irreligion, would lack all credibility. That was far from an isolated case. The question of whether witness competency depended on a belief in God (as well as on a belief in eternal rewards and punishments) haunted American courtrooms into the twentieth century. With the weight of public opinion—and, often enough, judicial opinion as well—on the side of religious profession, Tocqueville found the conclusion unavoidable: American Christianity, having turned disestablishment to its advantage, held significant sway over the nation’s social and political institutions, so much so that unbelievers found it routinely advisable to keep quiet about their irreligion. As one newspaper moralized in 1834 about “a professed atheist” who had died in a laboratory explosion, supposedly the very day he had publicly disavowed God, “If men cannot believe, will not believe, let them be silent.”⁹

Tocqueville was right about the fusion of Protestantism and republicanism in a new order based on voluntary associations, but all along it was equally evident how much the churches continued to depend on prior forms of establishment to maintain religion’s elevation over irreligion. Several state constitutions, during

the nation's founding epoch, had kept explicit religious tests on the books. Pennsylvania (1790), Tennessee (1796), and Mississippi (1817), for example, each made belief in God as well as a future state of rewards and punishments a condition of holding public office. Massachusetts (1780) and New Hampshire (1784) had gone further, enshrining specific Christian tests for elected representatives. Devisers of Connecticut's constitution had belatedly come around to the notion of disestablishing the state's Congregational order in 1818, but that broadened endorsement of religious freedom did not extend to the expression of libelous views against Christianity. Blasphemies against God, the Bible, or the Holy Trinity remained punishable with fines up to \$100 and imprisonment up to one year. A judge in New Haven handed out a six-month sentence in the county jail to one William Cannon for blasphemy in 1826; James Granger got a full year from a Litchfield judge in 1829. The state legislature dismissed a bill in 1836 that would have allowed atheists to testify in courts of law. Right through the Civil War, the aftermath of which forced another round of constitutional revisions, the civic standing of unbelievers looked shaky, if not perilous. The new state constitutions of Maryland (1867), North Carolina (1868), Arkansas (1874), and Texas (1876) loftily proclaimed the rights of religious conscience, even as they specifically barred those who denied the being of God from holding positions of public trust. Only in 1961 in *Torcaso v. Watkins* did the Supreme Court dispatch as unconstitutional the proposition that atheism could be used as a civic disqualification.¹⁰

The effectiveness of Christian uses of legal, political, and social coercions to quiet infidels and atheists only went so far, however. Building a confessedly Christian nation atop the epochal articulations of religious liberty produced during the revolutionary era proved an inherently unstable enterprise. The Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786), the brainchild of Thomas Jefferson, had enjoined that religious opinions and beliefs should in no way diminish, enlarge, or affect a citizen's civil capacities. Jefferson later specified in his *Autobiography* that the bill was expressly intended to reach beyond the religious to the irreligious, that it comprehended within its mantle of protection "the Jew

and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo and infidel.” This Jeffersonian principle reverberated widely. In 1788, two years after the passage of the Virginia bill and three years before the ratification of the First Amendment, the Vermont editor of the first post-Revolution imprint of Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* found it necessary to offer some improvements on the original—prominent among them was the deletion of the entire paragraph denying toleration to atheists and unbelievers; prior colonial editions through 1764 had simply left the recommended ban intact. In the legal and intellectual ferment that followed in the Revolution’s wake, proponents of the civil equality and religious liberty of freethinkers and infidels established a political beachhead that endured for their secularist heirs in the nineteenth century.¹¹

The proposition that religious freedom extended to the openly irreligious had a strong appeal among Jeffersonians, even as it struck fear into the hearts of Federalists. Sharp divergence on this point came into full display in the conflict over one of Jefferson’s bolder pronouncements in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god,” Jefferson brashly remarked. “It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”¹² Jefferson’s Federalist opponents were eager to conflate his deism with atheism, and that infamous passage long fed the attack machine. “Polytheism or atheism, ‘twenty gods or no god,’ is perfectly indifferent in Mr. Jefferson’s good citizen,” a Presbyterian minister fumed in reply. “A wretch may trumpet atheism from New-Hampshire to Georgia; may laugh at all the realities of futurity; may scoff and teach others to scoff at their accountability; it is no matter, says Mr. Jefferson, ‘it neither picks my pocket, nor breaks my leg.’ This is nothing less than representing civil society as founded in atheism.”¹³ Jefferson was not—in his theology or his politics—an atheist, but he was clear on this point: that religious liberty, free expression, and equal citizenship should be unencumbered by particular theistic limits, Christian or otherwise. Such sweeping rights of conscience in matters of religious opinion collided head on with long-standing warnings that deism, atheism, and infidelity constituted intolerable public dangers. That Americans

were free to worship any number of gods or to refuse to worship any god at all was a crucial Jeffersonian counterthrust—a fissure that freethinkers and unbelievers were repeatedly able to exploit against establishment-minded Protestants. As one infidel editor asked in 1857, “Suppose a man to hold publicly that there was *no* God; that the world as we see it, is the result of a fortuitous concourse of atoms; what then?” With Jefferson’s vaunted rhetorical dig in mind, he answered with a brusque follow-up question: “Does it break my leg or fracture my skull?”¹⁴

The irreligious continued to face legal, social, and political disadvantages throughout the nineteenth century, but those burdens were not necessarily insurmountable. The playing field upon which believers and unbelievers skirmished was often more level than it initially appeared—a Jeffersonian terrain as much as an indelibly Protestant one. Take the example of the Jewish infidel Ernestine Rose. When a Congregational minister in Bangor, Maine, named G. B. Little tried to keep her from speaking there in 1855, he thought he had an easy target. Over the last decade Rose had become infamous for speeches celebrating Tom Paine and heralding women’s rights; horrifying reports of her “ribaldries” aimed at Christianity preceded her; if she were allowed to lecture in Bangor, Little imagined it would simply be another occasion for her to air her “choicest blasphemies.” So, the minister and his allies pulled out all the stops: “We know of no object more deserving of contempt, loathing, and abhorrence than a *female Atheist*. We hold the vilest strumpet from the stews to be by comparison respectable.” It was ugly, and it backfired. Bangor had a lecture hall that could seat two thousand; it had never been filled to capacity—until Rose arrived. “They have never had such a large audience here before,” one reporter noted, “and I doubt whether they will soon again, as the curiosity and desire to see her, ‘*a female atheist*,’ was most intense.” An accomplished polemicist, Rose was in her element. Denouncing the “bigotry and intolerance” of her opponents, Rose admitted that she stood before the world “unprotected” by “a *profession* of religion,” but insisted the lack of that “cloak” in no way diminished her right to the public expression of her opinions. The crowd was “uncommonly atten-

tive, and remarkably enthusiastic”; Rose was warmly welcomed back for a second night. “Poor parson Little,” one of her sympathizers remarked, “was made littler than ever!” Ever unapologetic in her unbelief, Rose would grandly deliver on the “*female Atheist*” taunt six years later in 1861 when she gave a rousing address in Boston entitled “A Defence of Atheism.”¹⁵

In winning the round in Bangor, Rose illustrated an important point apt to get lost amid all the invidious rhetoric elevating the godly above the godless: namely, that liberality and forbearance frequently prevailed even for overt atheists and infidels. The *Boston Investigator*, a freethinking weekly that offered Rose unflinching support, reprinted a piece it found especially encouraging from “a religious newspaper” in 1860: “An Atheist is not to be tabooed” or “thrust out of the pale of humanity,” the writer argued, no matter how aggrieved “our Puritan forefathers” might be at the thought of tolerating the irreligious. “By all means let the Atheist have free speech; let him address the public ear by the press and by the platform.” More often than not, though, such acceptance of the public infidel remained grudging and calculated: not an endorsement of the equal rights of atheists, but a realization that clamping down on the ungodly only called more attention to their blasphemies—just as it had for Rose in Bangor. The Protestant historian Robert Baird exemplified that reluctant acquiescence to tolerating the irreligious in his formative *Religion in America* in 1844: “It is sometimes the best way to silence a noisy, brainless lecturer on atheism, to let him alone.” Baird was quite sure that nothing about the Constitution had been intended to grant the “rights of conscience” to “atheism, irreligion, or licentiousness,” but nonetheless conceded that the “universal enjoyment” of religious freedom meant that “even the Atheist may have his meetings in which to preach his doctrines.” Baird very much wanted to quell infidels, deists, and atheists—or, at least, to keep them hidden away in “private haunts” and “secret retirements”—but he wound up, almost in spite of himself, acknowledging their civil liberties as American citizens. Pragmatic calculation combined with a Jeffersonian logic on the principle of religious freedom to temper Baird’s unmistakable longing for coercion.¹⁶

As Baird's ambivalence suggested and as Rose's career demonstrated, liberality and forbearance were only part of the story. In 1853 in Hartford, Connecticut, one of Rose's lectures on the Bible degenerated into a mob scene as hissing students from nearby Trinity College repeatedly disrupted the proceedings. The sheriff had to be called in to restore order. With good reason, Rose remained seriously doubtful that unbelievers operated on an equal political and social footing with their religious neighbors. She took particular aim at the Massachusetts courts where—"within the shadow of Bunker Hill"—a witness of unblemished character could be disqualified for being an atheist, while the testimony of any "believing scoundrel" was counted trustworthy. Even in her own activist circles, it was far from certain that her infidelity would not prove a disqualifying blot. At the National Woman's Rights Convention in Philadelphia in 1854, Rose's bid for the presidency was almost derailed by "the objection that she was an atheist." Some suggested she not be allowed a place on the dais at all. Only Susan B. Anthony's strong rejoinder turned the tide: "Every religion or none should have an equal right" to the convention's platform. (A thorough Jeffersonian on this point, Anthony took the view that the women's rights movement was open to "representatives of all creeds and no creed—Jew or Christian, Protestant or Catholic, Gentile or Mormon, pagan or atheist," but that was far from the consensus among fellow suffragists who frequently scorned leaders like Rose and Elizabeth Cady Stanton for their infidelity.) Such debates about the public status and civic trustworthiness of unbelievers recurred throughout the century in a wide range of settings—from legislatures to schoolhouses to courtrooms to women's rights organizations and far beyond. The density of engagement between the religious and the irreligious was as palpable as it was perpetual—a trysting of fear and animosity with fair-mindedness and tolerance.¹⁷

Rose, who had immigrated to New York in 1836, returned to London in 1869 after more than three decades of reform activism in her adopted country. Had she stayed, she would have seen her irreligious critique of reigning orthodoxies come into much fuller expression in the century's final quarter. A solid contingent

of freethinkers—among them Abner Kneeland, Frances Wright, Gilbert Vale, Thomas Herttell, Horace Seaver, and Rose herself—had kept Tom Paine’s torch burning in the decades before the Civil War. Establishing a small handful of infidel journals and associations, they had consistently managed to raise the hackles of evangelical moral reformers quite out of proportion to their numbers. Their antebellum labors—in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, among other locales—laid the foundation for the luxuriant proliferation of freethinking lecturers and outright atheists in the 1870s and 1880s. At an Infidel Convention in New York City in 1860, the assembled company (Rose included) had dreamed of creating “a staff of Infidel lecturers” to counteract the effects of Christian evangelization. At the time, these gathered unbelievers could find only a couple of lecturers to commission, but twenty-five years later American freethinkers had a bounty of them—several dozen orators ready to grab the headlines away from famed evangelists and Christian-nation campaigners.¹⁸ Secularist publishing ventures expanded congruently, and the organizational structures of the cause—at national and local levels—were significantly elaborated. As freethinkers surged in cultural visibility in the late nineteenth century, so did their liberal secular claims on American public life: that free speech should supplant blasphemy as a legal principle, that religious tests in courts and statehouses should end, that the public schools should be free of religious instruction, that the absence of religious belief should have no effect on the rights and protections of citizenship—all these secularist demands, and more, gained renewed and vigorous articulation.

No one better exemplified the broader fascination that open unbelief had come to possess by the late nineteenth century than the infidel orator Robert Ingersoll. The disillusioned son of a Presbyterian minister, Ingersoll had immense gifts on the platform and routinely sold out his coast-to-coast lecture tours from the late 1870s through the 1890s. “It was impossible to look round upon the crowded audience that assembled to hear Colonel Robert Ingersoll’s lecture last night,” a stunned reporter for the *Sacramento Daily Union* wrote in 1877, “without feeling that such a gathering, for such a purpose, denoted a change in popular beliefs far

greater and more radical than is generally supposed to have taken place. Less than a generation ago it would have been impossible for any man to have delivered that lecture without sacrificing his reputation and social standing. He would have been denounced on all sides as an unprincipled infidel, an ‘atheist,’ and a wicked, Godless creature.” While the world had not changed as much as this gaping reporter suggested—Ingersoll was still habitually condemned for his unbelief—his extraordinary career nonetheless suggested that infidel lecturers had gained people’s ears to a degree that often confounded their critics. Even many Christians, the Sacramento reporter marveled, listened appreciatively as Ingersoll’s arguments struck “at the root of their old beliefs”; they seemed somehow satisfied with his assault on orthodoxy and the Bible—as if he were making manifest their own “drifting doubts.” Ingersoll hardly made atheism popular or mainstream, but his high profile was a clear indication of the new cultural prominence that unbelief had achieved by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Out of the shadows of Ingersoll’s celebrity, the village atheist would emerge as a recognizable American character, a self-assured dissenter openly at odds with the nation’s evangelical verities.¹⁹



A word about naming. Nineteenth-century unbelievers tried out various designations for themselves—with inherited terms like “freethinker” and “atheist” finding company with newer labels like “liberal” and “agnostic.” At an Infidel Convention in Philadelphia in 1857, those in attendance stumbled over the growing confusion in nomenclature. “The time is now come for the Unbelievers, Infidels, or Liberals (or what name soever we may call ourselves by) to stand forth”; so began one resolution that came to the floor. This uncertainty over naming created a long discussion. “Infidel” was a slur (akin to “atheist”) that some thought should be resisted with more positive constructions of free inquiry, though most wanted to wear the badge proudly. “Liberal” was seen as the more irenic and encompassing term, but some thought it made resolute unbelievers look too amenable to religious asso-

ciations and alliances (with, say, spiritualists or Unitarians). Two years later in 1859, when that small infidel association met again in Philadelphia, a resolution was floated suggesting that a new term of British coinage, “secularist,” be adopted as a more inclusive label than “atheist” or “infidel.” The assembled roundly dismissed that idea as “rank cowardice,” a lexicographer’s softening concession to Christianity, but their opposition did not prevent some infidels from trying out the new designation. The naming problem remained endlessly cloudy. One freethinker, puzzling in 1884 over the most appropriate label, wanted to “add a name of my own” to the mix of options; he recommended “true Americans” (it did not catch on). A journalist, looking back in 1933 on the irreligious agitators of the previous century, made light of all this slipperiness: “They could never even agree on what to call themselves. Freethinker, Rationalist, Agnostic, Atheist, Liberal, Secularist, Monist, Materialist—take your choice!”²⁰ And that was to say nothing of Philanthropist, Positivist, Humanist, or Humanitarian.

However baffling in their profusion, the various tags were recognizably bound together through a set of shared attributes. Those commonalities included: (1) a rejection of Christian orthodoxy and biblical authority that passed from deism into atheism; (2) a very strict construction of church-state separation; (3) a commitment to advancing scientific inquiry as the pathway to verifiable knowledge and technological prowess; (4) an anticlerical scorn for both Catholic and Protestant power; (5) a universalistic imagining of equal rights, civil liberties, and humanitarian goodwill; and (6) a focus on this world alone as the domain of human happiness and fulfillment. Most freethinkers saw the sundry labels at their disposal as mutually reinforcing, as shorthand condensations of these overlapping aims, principles, and objections. A correspondent to the *Boston Investigator* in 1882, for example, wrote to ask the editor: “I would like to know if Secularism and Atheism mean the same thing?” To which the editor replied: “They mean the same so far as concerns any useful and practical purpose.”²¹ The various appellations were, in short, interdependent and routinely transposable. Everyday interchangeability trumped fine distinctions,

no matter how often one contributor or another tried to sharpen the political or metaphysical significance of a given marker.

The use of the label “village atheist” in the pages and title of this book warrants particular comment and contextualization. The earliest reference to “the village atheist” occurred in an 1808 review of the work of the British clergyman and poet George Crabbe. His collection of *Poems* (1807) included “The Parish Register,” a richly descriptive account of the local characters surrounding an Anglican vicar in rural England. The *Monthly Review* called particular attention to Crabbe’s “masterful delineation of the village atheist,” though the poet had actually used the phrase “rustic Infidel” to depict this neighborhood lout:

Each Village Inn has heard the Ruffian boast,
That he believ’d ‘in neither God nor Ghost;
‘That when the Sod upon the Sinner press’d,
‘He, like the Saint, had everlasting Rest.

The picture Crabbe painted of the “rustic Infidel”—a hearty companion of roadhouse quaffers, a libertine who considers “the Marriage-Bond the Bane of Love,” a supremely “Bad Man” who conflates “the Wants of Rogues” with “the Rights of Man”—possessed, to say the least, none of the nonconformist romance that Van Wyck Brooks’s depiction projected a century or so later. What “The Parish Register,” first published in the United States in 1808, did suggest was that the village atheist’s ancestry wound its way back into long-standing forms of impiety and profane living. Crabbe combined the scoffing irreverence of the tavern—the vulgarities of a Benjamin Sawser or an Elijah Leach—with the pigeonholes made for the deistic infidelity of Tom Paine and his acolytes. That combined image of sloshed blasphemer and Bible-ridiculing deist followed freethinkers out of the late Enlightenment deep into the nineteenth century. When Yale professor Henry A. Beers published his *Outline Sketch of American Literature* in 1887, he depicted “the village atheist” as a figure much like the one in Crabbe’s register—irreverent, half-educated, and pugnacious, with a well-thumbed copy of Paine’s *Age of Reason* in hand to inspire his harangues of the faithful.²²

Depicting the “rustic Infidel” from a churchly vantage point, as Crabbe did, cast the character in an entirely unflattering light. Soon, though, the village atheist began to look almost appealing in the hands of more heterodox observers. In his “Divinity School Address” in 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested an emerging variation when he presented “the bold village blasphemer” as a figure before whom the creaking orthodox minister can only quake when they meet in the street: “The village blasphemer sees fear in the face, form, and gait of the minister.” The radical Unitarian urge to applaud the “village infidel” as a daring heretic only grew more robust after the Civil War; both William Channing Gannett and Minot J. Savage sang the personage’s praises as an emblem of earnest doubt, humanistic striving, and intellectual integrity. By the 1880s and 1890s, these paired locutions—“the village atheist” and “the village infidel”—had become recognizable labels in the copious vocabulary employed to describe America’s resident freethinkers and secularist dissenters. Both coinages retained a distinctly literary feel that carried particular appeal for poets, novelists, and critics. For example, Harry Leon Wilson’s turn-of-the-century novel *The Seeker* featured a character named Milo Barrus, whom Wilson identified upfront in his list of characters as “the village atheist.” The head of a band of “care-free Sabbath loafers,” Barrus was “so bad a man that he loved to spell God with a little g.”²³

By the 1910s and 1920s, the notion of the village infidel or atheist came to possess a noticeably nostalgic aura. When Edgar Lee Masters included a poem entitled “The Village Atheist” in his *Spoon River Anthology* in 1916, he offered only a graveyard epitaph for the talkative, contentious freethinker. Likewise, when the liberal Protestant minister Herbert S. Bigelow published *The Religion of Revolution* the same year, he presented a chapter in tribute to “a village infidel” whom he had dreadfully feared in his rural Ohio boyhood. Revisiting the town, the minister looks for the old freethinker—an apostate who had seen the Christianity of Bigelow’s youth for the “contracted” and “shrunken” faith that it was—but mournfully finds that the man has been dead “these many years.” As with Masters and Bigelow, Van Wyck Brooks

was also looking backwards in 1920 to the heterodox provocations of the previous generation. Twain's hero, the silver-tongued Robert Ingersoll, was for Brooks a leading measure of plainspoken irreligious dissent, the great exemplar of the "crude atheism" that Twain had hungered to express. Ingersoll's death in 1899 had portended to many of his admirers the end of an era, and Twain himself had felt the loss keenly. "Except for my daughter's, I have not grieved for any death as I have grieved for his," the novelist wrote in a letter of condolence to Ingersoll's niece. Village atheists had lost their colonel in 1899, and that made their decline in the next century seem all the more inevitable.²⁴

Soon, the elegiac note became even more pronounced. "The village atheist who used to corner the parson by asking where Cain got his wife is becoming extinct," journalist George Seibel wrote in the *American Mercury* in 1933. Seibel had grown up listening to infidel orators like James L. York and W. S. Bell, and he fondly recalled those "enemies of Yahweh" of a half century ago—among them, the nurseryman-turned-publisher D. M. Bennett, the "learned blacksmith" John Peck, the "atheist watchmaker" Otto Wettstein, and the erudite naturalist Felix Oswald with his traveling menagerie of pet monkeys. Seibel very much missed these "odd characters" with all their quirky methods of staging God's funeral.²⁵ Of course, village infidels were not quite the bygone relics Seibel made them out to be. Publisher Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, for example, was still cranking out heaps of freethought pamphlets in the 1930s from his perch in Girard, Kansas, and playing the part of the village atheist with visible delight. But, Seibel's nostalgia, not his historical exactitude, was what mattered—the felt loss of the village infidel's maverick individuality to churchgoing convention and Fundamentalist reaction. For literary sophisticates and sage pundits, the waning of the village atheist became one more sign of the continuing sway of the country's George Babbitts and Elmer Ganttrys.²⁶

Village Atheists grounds itself between the rustic infidels of the late Enlightenment and the romanticized nonconformists of the 1920s and 1930s. It trades not in literary representations or typecast characters, but in the flesh-and-blood freethinkers who

made the village atheist such a culturally resonant figure in the first place. Like the rest of the options that had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century to describe the nation's secularist dissenters, the appellation "village atheist" was pliable. This extends as well to how the expression is employed in this book: it refers not only to overt atheists well-rooted in small towns, but also to a wider run of agnostics, infidels, and freethinkers, many of whom proved quite peripatetic and even cosmopolitan. That *Time* magazine in 1943 could proclaim the Baltimore-based journalist and satirist H. L. Mencken the nation's "outstanding village atheist" suggests the phrase's untethered, figurative qualities. Like Mencken or Ingersoll, the freethinkers given focal attention in these pages—the itinerant secularist Samuel Putnam, the combative cartoonist Watson Heston, the tent-preaching blasphemer Charles B. Reynolds, and the obscene atheist Elmina Drake Slenker—were far more than small-town cranks. They all began their careers with local performances of their unbelief and then built infidel personas of far-flung notoriety upon those religious ruptures. They became public atheists, in other words, but ones whose ministries always remained deeply entwined with their village kin. Indeed, their reputations depended on the strength of that kinship—on how their own expressions of infidelity resonated with their dispersed and often isolated comrades from Maine to Oregon.²⁷

Above all, the notion of the village atheist is used to call attention to the quotidian qualities of American unbelief: that is, to how the struggle over God, revelation, and religious affiliation unfolded at the grassroots rather than in universities or literary bohémias—in Boonton, New Jersey, or Snowville, Virginia, or Carthage, Missouri, rather than at Columbia University or in Greenwich Village. Much of the story about the origins of modern atheism has been told, understandably, as a history of ideas, particularly of the ways in which Christian theologians effectively abetted unbelief through a series of compromises—with natural philosophers, deistic rationalists, and humanistic moralists—that gradually depleted the faith of its intellectual particularity and potency. Needless to say, telling the history of unbelief from the

perspective of Christianity's self-inflicted wounds reveals little about the stakes involved for freethinkers and secularists themselves. It leaves the plebeian world of the village atheist almost entirely untouched.²⁸ American freethinkers emerged from an intricate web of everyday encounters—with itinerant evangelists, neighborhood converts, fiery populists, crusading reformers, spiritualist mediums, and hard-bitten sinners. The religious estrangements that vexed them were not philosophically abstracted; they were visceral, relational, and densely particular. They were rarely sophisticated metaphysicians worrying over the niceties of epistemology, but instead aggrieved contrarians stunned at the moral shabbiness of scriptural stories or the manipulative theatrics of popular revivalists. Their myriad alienations—from the God of the Bible, from the religious regulation of marriage and sexuality, from pious restraints on Sunday recreations, from equations of social respectability and moral trustworthiness with church membership—were hardly ethereal, but rather earthy in their lived concreteness. Village atheists, by self-profession, minded this world, not things spiritual, and their stories are told here with that mundane materiality very much in view.

A word as well about the larger storyline. A secularist narrative retains its temptations—slowly, but surely, over two-plus centuries, religious freedom has widened to include the irreligious, and, consequently, unbelievers have come to enjoy the rights and liberties of American citizenship equally with their believing counterparts. From this perspective, the liberal secularist principles that nineteenth-century freethinkers forwarded eventually carried the day; the outworking of a wall-of-separation logic in the courts has effectively materialized a secular polity neutral to the claims of believers and nonbelievers. The secularist plotline has gained additional traction in recent years from accruing sociological data that indicates a boom in the number of Americans who count themselves as having no religion at all. That demographic cohort had swollen by 2014 to about 23 percent of the U.S. population, and, while an internally diverse lot, these religious “Nones” suggest that the strong partiality once accorded religious identification has lost significant ground; it is socially

acceptable now to sidestep religious adherence entirely—that is, to be “nothing in particular.”²⁹ Nonbelievers, it would seem then, are not only constitutionally protected, but also culturally normalized. “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers,” President Barack Obama proclaimed in his first inaugural address in 2009.³⁰ His words had a fine Jeffersonian ring—with one notable exception. Obama exchanged “nonbeliever” for “infidel,” a signal in itself perhaps of neutrality’s triumph. That presidential acknowledgment, made during one of the nation’s most hallowed ceremonies, could be taken as a teleological marker. The nonreligious have finally ascended to equal civic standing with their faith-espousing compatriots.

The secularist storyline has its merits and attractions as well as its clear limitations and gaping holes. Church-state jurisprudence is ever-evolving and necessarily unsettled, always awaiting the next spate of litigation over state-funded chaplaincies, faith-based initiatives, or reproductive rights to sort through the nation’s religious-political entanglements. Groups such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation and the American Humanist Association, even with precedents like *Torcaso* in hand, remain quite accustomed to setbacks in the cases they fight on behalf of atheists and agnostics. Indeed, the very supposition of neutrality—that the government cannot be in the business of overtly favoring believers over nonbelievers—has been roundly disputed at the Supreme Court level in recent decades; Justices William Rehnquist and Antonin Scalia often took particular umbrage at the legal challenges posed by “devout atheists” and were expressly hostile to the notion that the state could not accord preference to civic religious observance over irreligious objections. “We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being,” the Supreme Court had announced in *Zorach v. Clauson* in 1952, and, frequently enough, judicial decisions are still handed down—on everything from the “under God” phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance to prayers before municipal meetings—that make this theological-political congruence sound like the nation’s accepted orthodoxy.³¹

The convolutions in the legal landscape are matched by the thorniness of survey data. To be sure, the religious “Nones” are growing rapidly in number, but outright atheists remain a highly suspect minority when it comes to everything from gaining the trust of voters to winning over prospective in-laws. A 2006 study, for example, tested two propositions with its interviewees: “This Group Does Not At All Agree with My Vision of American Society” and “I Would Disapprove if My Child Wanted to Marry a Member of this Group.” Atheists won on both scores—39.6 percent and 47.6 percent, respectively; they readily outdistanced other minorities, including Muslims, gays, recent immigrants, Jews, and African Americans. Those prejudicial judgments routinely make themselves felt in the lives of nonbelievers. A follow-up study in 2012 found that 42.9 percent of self-identified atheists and agnostics reported experiencing discrimination on account of their irreligion over the previous five years—whether in familial and social relationships, at school, or in the workplace. Even with the end of the Cold War and the diminished specter of “godless communism,” atheists and freethinkers still inspire plenty of fear and loathing. They are often still relegated to a place beyond the pale of equal citizenship and social trust.³²

Safe to say, any neat linear narrative about the public fate of American nonbelievers quickly breaks down—not only because of the ongoing conflicts and ambivalences that characterize the contemporary scene, but also because of the religious-secular contortions that have been evident throughout the nation’s history. Has an entrepreneurial religious marketplace, for example, driven the country to remarkable heights of religiosity, making it appear eccentrically God-fearing compared to most European nations? Or, have secularizing forces—in higher education, in entertainment and the arts, in science and medicine—brought about a gradual de-Christianization of American public life? Good historians are able to make compelling cases for both sides of this argument because these contradictory trends have long coexisted.³³ The question then is not whether secularism has been advancing, while religion has been retreating (or vice versa), but rather how the two have interacted, overlapped, coincided, and clashed. The reli-

gious and the secular, belief and unbelief—these are not zero-sum games, but relationships of tangled complexity, fluctuating rivalry, and constitutive mutuality. The underlying presumption that the nation's history must be headed one way or another—through an unfolding process of secularization or Christianization—remains hard to relinquish, but the history told here purposefully occupies the uneasy space between those persistent narrative devices. Only a tensile plot, shorn of both Protestant hegemony and secular inevitability, can make sense of the relational interdependence and volatility that has long subsisted between believers and non-believers in American culture.

A word finally about numbers. Notwithstanding the recent upward trend for the religious “Nones,” including the 7-8 percent of Americans who identify openly as atheist or agnostic, the unshakeable impression is that unbelievers remain—as they have always been—a negligible presence in a deeply religious nation. (Mark Twain's joke about Judge Driscoll's Society of Freethinkers mustering only two members in four years typifies that perspective.) Certainly infidels and freethinkers constituted a distinct minority in nineteenth-century America, as do avowed atheists and agnostics in the early twenty-first century, but the number of unbelievers was not inconsequential then—just as it is not inconsequential now. In the census of 1890, the first to collect extensive data on religious identification, formal church membership stood at about 35 percent of the population. The Methodist layman H. K. Carroll, the statistician overseeing the religious returns for the census, was confident adherence rates were actually much higher than that once attendees who were not full-fledged communicants, including young children, were added to the picture. Those adjustments more than doubled the aggregate number of Protestant adherents and made the country appear overwhelmingly Christian—indeed, about 80 percent Protestant (when Catholics were grudgingly added, the number rose to about 90 percent). Even with Carroll's optimistic Protestant reading of the census data, however, five million people were still left “belonging to the non-religious and anti-religious classes, including freethinkers, secularists, and infidels.” Though Carroll continued

to insist that there were “but few real atheists” in the United States, he had to admit that 8 percent of the population appeared to be “an active or passive opponent of religion.” That in itself was a hefty number. If the irreligious had somehow constituted their own denomination, they would have had as many communicants as the Methodists did in 1890, and far more than the Presbyterians.³⁴

Carroll was right that, by all kinds of measures, American Protestantism was growing and flourishing at the end of the nineteenth century—in the value of property holdings, in the seating capacity of churches, in the number of ministerial recruits and formal members. Yet, even as his statistical compilations reassured him of the continuing ascendancy of evangelical Christianity, he had to admit that his confident projections masked another problem: namely, many who counted themselves Christians “seldom or never [went] into a house of worship” and were essentially “indifferent to the claims of religion.” This gap between profession and practice had caused the Unitarian pastor Octavius Frothingham to remark in 1878 that there were “no statistics to describe the numerical or geographical extent” of unbelief. “It is larger than can be expressed in figures,” he argued, because “a great many who are present in the churches” were actually secret unbelievers, thus making “ecclesiastical connections” an unreliable measure of Christianity’s hold on the culture. “Unbelief is more widely spread now than it ever was;” Frothingham declared, “it is more general; it comprehends more classes of people; it embraces more orders and varieties of mind.” The minister was not offering this estimate as a jeremiad, a call for revival, but instead as someone who, as an *outré* Unitarian, knew intimately the “beliefs of the unbelievers.” Ballyhooed adherence rates inflated Protestant dominance, Frothingham maintained, while disguising the extent of religious disaffection, indifference, and doubt.³⁵

Likely Frothingham, as a post-Christian liberal, overestimated in his turn the extent of clandestine unbelief and the fragility of American faith, but he was certainly right about this much: plenty of his fellow citizens still found it prudent to hide their skeptical misgivings behind at least nominal church affiliation. Religious membership retained the benefits of public respectability,

while open expressions of infidelity carried corresponding social risks. As a routinely excoriated minority, freethinkers and atheists knew that it behooved them to tread warily, even as they bemoaned that imposed caution. The testimony of a lonely infidel in Zanesville, Ohio, was suggestive of the minority status and social marginality that so often accompanied professed unbelief. Writing in 1854 to the *Boston Investigator*, he noted how pleased he was to learn about the cadre of British liberals, led by free-thinker George Jacob Holyoake, who had recently come up with a new name for their unbelief, “secularism.” “For many years I have been one of that much-abused class called Atheists,” he confessed, “but I never liked the name. In youth I was taught it was some hideous monster, and I cannot yet get rid of the idea that there is something derogatory in it when applied to me among my Christian family.” As a small-town infidel, he felt all “alone” in Zanesville, while everyone else around him seemed to have one religious society or another with which to identify. “With a new name and some good design to work by,” he hazarded, “I believe I could organize a small community here that are now wandering in the mazes of doubt.” Though some of his fellow infidels were quick to cast the proposed name change as a sign of weakness, the secularist badge provided this Zanesville atheist with a little dash of hope that he might yet overcome the civic isolation that was part of his everyday experience. Protestant dominance may have been less secure than the high rates of church adherence suggested, but that proved small consolation for avowed atheists who continued to feel keenly their peculiarity. Open unbelievers, like the Zanesville secularist, remained accustomed to being outliers.³⁶

However often atheists and freethinkers pronounced that history was on their side—that the triumph of scientific rationality and secular statecraft was assured—there was finally no getting around their minority status. The social costs associated with unbelief—and the pressures to keep quiet about it or to blunt it with one humanistic gloss or another—remained high throughout the nineteenth century, and well beyond. In one of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius’s “Little Blue Books” from about 1930, freethinking lawyer Frank Swancara pointedly asked, “Have We Religious

Freedom?" Studying at length the debilities America's unbelievers faced, Swancara very much doubted that they enjoyed liberty of conscience, certainly not in the same way that mainstream Protestants did. "The atheist or agnostic must keep still, and allow the religious public to regard him as a silent believer," Swancara yet claimed of his own era. To the "orthodox majority," the unbeliever who openly disclaimed God or disparaged the Bible remained "but a monster, in human form," odious to his or her Christian neighbors. For America's village atheists, secularism did not define their communities, let alone their age. Harboring dreams of metaphysical conquest and political mastery, they settled instead for filing a series of minority reports. Often their secularism proved but a petition for the toleration of their monstrosity, an appeal against the boycotting of their aberrant godlessness, a nonconformist case for irreligious liberty in a country long wary of the free exercise of unbelief. Rough-edged figures who worked against the grain of a godly nation, village atheists negotiated their way into American public life through decades of engagement and conflict. It is time now to give their secularist stories a fuller hearing.³⁷