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Marlowe and the politics of religion

It is a critical commonplace that religion and politics were inseparably entwined in Marlowe's England. Queen Elizabeth was 'Supreme Governess' of the Church of England, and the Church of England's leading primate, Archbishop John Whitgift, wielded considerable authority as a member of her Privy Council. Since monarchical rule was divinely sanctioned with the queen herself as God's vice-regent, disobedience to her laws was not just a crime, but a sin against God; conversely, wilful dissent from the Church's official prescriptions of order and worship was not just a sin but a crime against the state. These ideas, of course, constituted the official ideology of the Elizabethan government, but English subjects (as well as foreigners) who disagreed politically with the Crown shared the notion that Church and state, religious and civil authority, sacred and secular values, are intimately and inextricably linked, whether they advocated the queen's overthrow (as Catholics loyal to Rome did after a Papal Bull excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570) or called for the routing of bishops and their hierarchical mode of ecclesiastical polity from the national church (as Puritan radicals did throughout the reign). Not surprisingly, Marlowe represents these complex intersections of religion and politics in his works, questioning many of the verities his audience took for granted about them. In the discussion of this topic which follows, my focus will be primarily on the plays with occasional reference to the poetry and translations.

Dissecting God's scourge

With no stage-heaven or -hell, no supernatural characters, and no explicit moralistic message expressed in jog-trot verse – all typical features of popular drama in 1580s London – *Tamburlaine, Part One* would appear to usher in the age of Elizabethan 'secular' theatre. And yet this play reverberates with religious language and iconography and provocatively interrogates the political implications of mainstream religious doctrine, particularly the notion

of divine providence. Tamburlaine was most famously known in the historical narratives of Marlowe's own time as the 'scourge of God', and indeed this is how he is described on the title page to the 1590 edition. Moreover, both Tamburlaine himself and his enemies repeatedly make this identification throughout both plays. 'There is a God full of revenging wrath', Tamburlaine exclaims, 'Whose Scourge I am, and him will I obey.'[1] Tamburlaine illustrates the notion, popularized by Protestant writings in Elizabethan England, that while bloodthirsty tyrants are entirely responsible for their wicked deeds, they carry them out in accordance with God's will, and are thus used as 'scourges' or agents of divine justice to punish sinful individuals, communities, even entire nations.[2] The prototype of the biblical scourge is the Assyrian tyrant, described in the Books of Kings, Chronicles, and Isaiah, whom Marlowe may have seen staged in a revival of Nicholas Udall's Cambridge play *Ezechias*, in which the Assyrian conqueror is described as 'Huge in armament and of a huge body', a fitting physical profile of Tamburlaine himself.[3] Divine vengeance in the play is visited on the innocent as well as the wicked, most notably in the slaughter of the Virgins in *Tamburlaine, Part One* and the drowning of the citizens of Babylon in *Tamburlaine, Part Two*. As sensational and horrifying as these acts are, Elizabethan providential theory agreed that many good people suffer when entire nations are scourged (such as England during the Wars of the Roses, thematically treated in Shakespeare's *Richard III*). Nevertheless, the rival kings and rulers Tamburlaine defeats – Cosroe, Bajazeth, Orcanes, Calapine, and their allies – are all shown to be power-hungry infidels deserving of their fate. Treated in particularly contemptible terms is Bajazeth, the Turkish Emperor of *Tamburlaine, Part One*, who boasts about the Christian apostates who have joined his army. When this historical figure threatened Christendom itself by laying siege to Constantinople, the eastern centre of Christianity, European writers feared him as an agent of divine retribution on a decaying, divided Christendom. Tamburlaine becomes the scourge of the scourge when he defeats Bajazeth and lifts the siege of Constantinople, enlarging 'Those Christian captives, which you keep as slaves' (*1 Tamb.* 3.3.46–7). For this feat, the historical Tamburlaine was celebrated throughout Europe.

And yet Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* plays question whether providential explanations of events are human fictions which, in some instances, constitute self-deception, but in the hands of cunning politicians, are cynically appropriated and propagated to advance their power and subdue dissent. Marlowe's complex, if not ambivalent, treatment of Elizabethan providential theory is illustrated in the sub-plot featuring the Christian King Sigismund and the Turkish ruler Orcanes in the early scenes of *Tamburlaine, Part Two*. When the armies of the two leaders face off near the River Danube on the borders of

Christian Europe, Sigismund accepts the Turk's offer of a truce, made binding by a solemn oath to their respective deities, Sigismund vowing, 'By him that made the world and saved my soul, / . . . Sweet Jesus Christ, I solemnly protest, / And vow to keep this peace inviolable' (2 *Tamb.* 1.2.133–6). Sigismund's Christian allies, however, persuade him to break the league, arguing that oaths to infidels are not binding in the eyes of God and are not trustworthy with them anyway, and that the Turks' vulnerability is an opportunity given by divine providence to scourge their 'foul blasphemous paganism' (2 *Tamb.* 2.1.53). Yet despite heavy odds in their favour due to the depleted Turkish forces (much of their army moved south to challenge Tamburlaine), the Hungarian Christians are defeated, and Sigismund concludes that 'God hath thundered vengeance from on high, / For my accursed and hateful perjury' (2 *Tamb.* 2.3.2–3). Since Orcanes himself had called on Christ to punish the Christians for the sacrilegious oath-breaking (contrasting with Tamburlaine's later calling on Mahomet to avenge his sins, to no effect), the Turkish victory over the Europeans may be seen as an act of vengeance by the Christian God. Yet Marlowe undermines this providential explanation. When Orcanes asks Gazellus whether he agrees that the defeat is attributable to the justice and power of Christ, his fellow-Turk replies, ''Tis but the fortune of the wars my Lord, / Whose power is often proved a miracle' (2 *Tamb.* 2.3.31–2). This sounds very much like the statement fellow playwright Thomas Kyd attributed to Marlowe to illustrate his atheism: 'That things esteemed to be donn by devine power might have aswell been don by observation of men' (MacLure, p. 35).

The *Tamburlaine* plays raise other questions about the ways in which religious doctrine and military/political institutions are linked. Tamburlaine's career shows how it is possible through extraordinary will-power, personal charisma, brute strength, and military strategy, to rise from a lowly shepherd to become emperor of the Eastern world. This challenges the basis on which European royalty justified and maintained their rule – divinely ordained succession through primogeniture – and it legitimates radical mobility through the social ranks, which was discouraged, if not condemned, by orthodox religious and political notions of 'place' and social hierarchy. Even Tamburlaine's repeated claim to be a divinely ordained scourge suggests that he has simply adopted this identity to give a higher aura of authority to his rule and further his military and political aims. 'But since I exercise a greater name, / The scourge of God and terror of the world,' he asserts late in *Tamburlaine, Part Two*, 'I *must apply my self to fit those terms*' (2 *Tamb.* 4.1.155–7; my italics).

The idea that Tamburlaine is simply exploiting religion is reinforced by the range of contradictory stances he takes towards it. He speaks, at least

at one point, as a practising Muslim (*2 Tamb.* 1.3.109); at other times he is defiant of, or sees himself as superior to, all religious authority (e.g., *1 Tamb.* 1.2.174ff.); and certainly in the climactic scene of *Tamburlaine, Part Two*, where he burns the Koran and shakes his sword heavenward, taunting Mohammed to strike vengeance upon him, he appeared to his contemporaries as a blaspheming atheist.[4] Whatever playgoers are to think of Tamburlaine's own religious stance, the Koran-burning episode (which ends *without* Mahomet answering Tamburlaine with vengeance) is the culmination of a number of moments or scenes in the plays which question, if not confirm to the audience, the non-existence of the Muslim God and reveal Islam to be a religion of empty curses and providential threats. Time and again, Bajazeth and his allies predict a sensational, violent ending to Tamburlaine at the hands of Mahomet, but these never come true. When the fervent prayers of Bajazeth and Zabina to Mahomet go unheeded, the humiliated Turkish emperor calls out in frustrated rage, 'O *Mahomet*, Oh sleepy *Mahomet!*' (*1 Tamb.* 3.3.269), while his wife Zabina first curses Mahomet then loses her faith altogether before she and Bajazeth dash their brains out: 'Then is there left no *Mahomet*, no God?' (*1 Tamb.* 5.1.239). A godless religion or not, Marlowe's audience would have observed that Islam is a more tolerant religion than Christianity in *Tamburlaine, Part Two*, where Orcanes pays tribute to both Christ and Mahomet, a gesture not unheard of among sixteenth-century Muslims.[5]

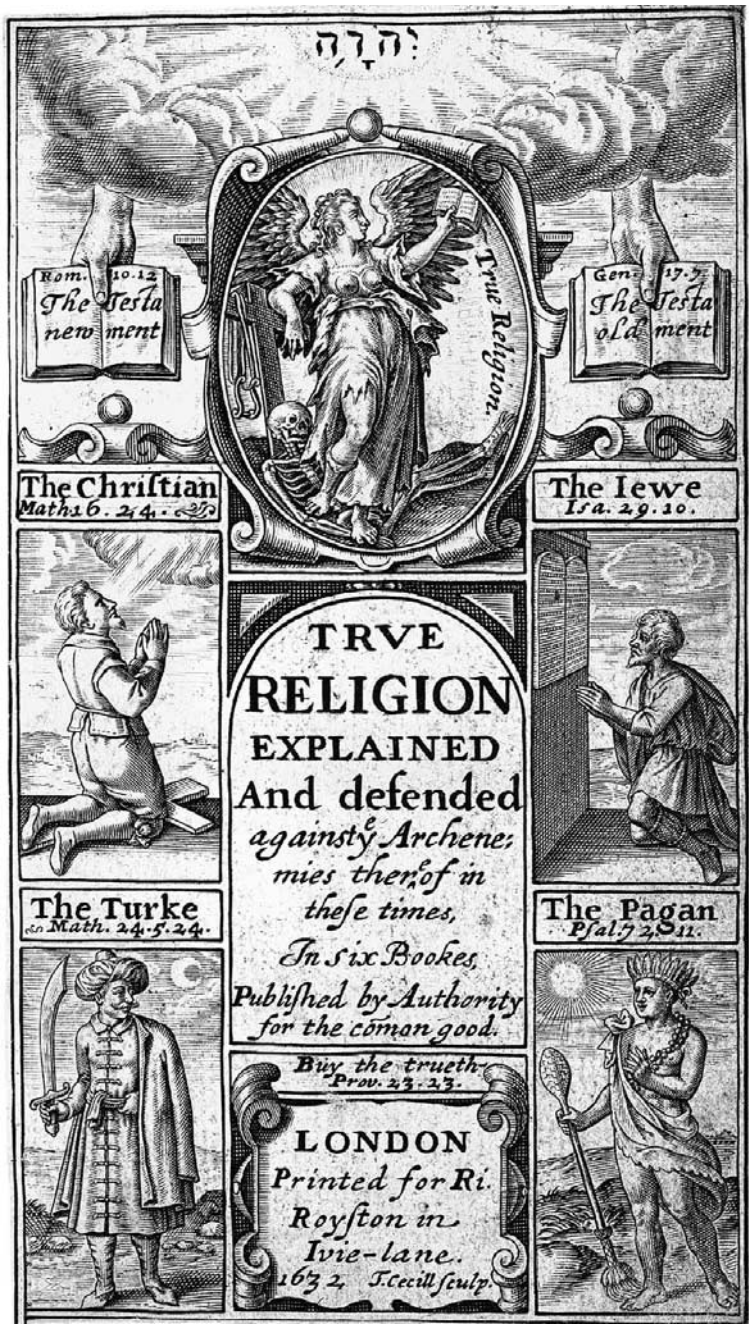
While it is probably true that continental Catholicism, and specifically Catholic Spain, was the enemy Elizabethan England feared most in the 1580s, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* gives us another important perspective on politico-religious relations of the time, suggesting that England shared with all European nations, Catholic as well as Protestant, the dread of a holy war waged by the Ottoman Empire against western Europe. When Bajazeth threatens Tamburlaine with the 'force of Turkish arms / Which lately made all Europe quake for fear' (*1 Tamb.* 3.3.134–5), he was not exaggerating but expressing a truth that was every bit as real for Europe in the late sixteenth century as in the play's early fifteenth-century setting. When facing this threat, many European Protestant and Catholic nations set aside their differences to see this as a threat against *Christendom*. This explains why nations of divided religious and political allegiances joined together to oppose the Muslim infidel, and why it was possible for English bishops to order prayers to be said on behalf of the mostly Catholic Christians in Malta to protect them against their Turkish invaders in 1565.[6] By the 1580s, the Elizabethan government was engaged in diplomatic relations with the Turks to increase their trade, and they were happy to exploit the enmity between the Ottoman Empire and their more immediate enemy the Spanish, who fiercely competed for control

of commerce and territory in the Mediterranean. Within this context, then, Tamburlaine must have generated both admiration and fear for contemporary audiences: admiration for his military efficiency and his conquering the Ottoman Empire, a projected fantasy of Christian European nations; and at the same time, fear of a brutal tyrant, the 'Turkish Tamburlaine', as he was called, indistinguishable in most respects from the Turks themselves.[7]

Stranger Jews and Catholics

The other play Marlowe wrote in which the Turks figure prominently is *The Jew of Malta*. Religion, and particularly religious 'policy' (Plate 1), are more explicitly evident in this black farce set on the western Mediterranean island of Malta, which the Turks fiercely attacked and besieged but failed to capture in 1565. The island by this time was governed by the Catholic Knights of St John the Evangelist, an elite order commissioned by and answerable only to the Pope for the purpose of protecting pilgrims from the Turkish enemy on their travels to the holy land. After surrendering to the Turks on the island of Rhodes, the Knights were brought to Malta by Emperor Charles V of Spain. In Marlowe's play, they find themselves caught between their political commitment to the Muslim Turks, to whom they owe a ten-year tribute, and their religious allegiance to the Catholic Spaniards, represented by Admiral Del Bosco, who shames them for dealing with the infidel. To pay the tribute, Ferneze, the governor of the island, turns to the Jews in Malta, who are not citizens but 'strangers' because they will not convert to Christianity, and this is the action which leads to a series of vengeful acts by Barabas, the wealthiest of the Jews on the island, whose entire estate is seized and his home converted to a nunnery.[8]

What did Marlowe and his audience know about Jews and what was their attitude towards them? Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 and did not resettle legally in the country until 1655. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that about 200 lived in England in the late sixteenth century, with a community of about 80 Portuguese Morannos (Jews who converted to Christianity) settling in London, the most famous member of whom was Roderigo Lopez, physician to Queen Elizabeth. Accused of plotting to assassinate the queen and Don Antonio, pretender to the Portuguese throne, Lopez was hanged in 1594. His fervent claim at his execution 'that he loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ' was greeted with derisive laughter by the crowd witnessing it.[9] The public sensation surrounding the trial and execution of Lopez illustrates the explosive mix of racial prejudice, religion, and politics that lies at the centre of *The Jew of Malta*, which, not surprisingly, was revived for this event, staged fifteen times at the Rose playhouse



1 Frontispiece of Hugh Grotius's *True Religion Explained and Defended* (London, 1632).

in the summer of 1594, quite possibly motivating Shakespeare to write *The Merchant of Venice* around the same time.[10]

Marlowe's portrayal of Barabas combines historical facts about famous Jewish merchants of his day with a heavy dose of stage-stereotyping and centuries-old prejudice, which included the beliefs that Jews poisoned wells and crucified children (*JM* 2.3.181; 3.6.49). The name Barabas derives from the biblical thief whom the Jews asked Pontius Pilate to release in place of Christ before his crucifixion. According to the informer Richard Baines, Marlowe himself made the blasphemous claim 'That Crist deserved better to dy then Barrabas and that the Jewes made a good Choise, though Barrabas were both a theif and a murtherer' (MacLure, p. 37). This is certainly not the 'message' of Marlowe's play, and it is conceivable that Baines was inspired to invent the statement after viewing or hearing about *The Jew*, but it certainly captures the irreverent utterances of Barabas and the play's choric figure, Machiavel, who claims to be Barabas's mentor in the play's opening address. Machievel is a caricature of the Italian political theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli, who was notorious in England for advocating, among other things, the use of religion, when necessary, as an instrument of state power. Calling religion 'a childish toy' (Prologue 14), Machievel counts among his disciples the Guise, a French Catholic leader, and various popes for whom religion is a convenient mask behind which one murders one's way to high office. As he himself admits, Barabas is not after political power (*JM* 1.1.128), but rather the accumulation of wealth which brings its own kind of authority and influence. If Marlowe gives Barabas a well-developed Jewish identity, Judaism itself is represented as a bogus religion, one in which the 'Blessings promised' to Abraham are interpreted *not* as the spiritual rewards of faith in Christ (as the Protestantism of Marlowe's audience taught) but rather the worldly prosperity and economic superiority of God's chosen people.[11] In other words, Marlowe implies, Jewish religion justifies the acquisitive drive, restless pursuit of riches, and usurious money practices exemplified by Jewish merchants such as Barabas. Of course, as a disciple of Machiavel, Barabas himself does not take his own religion seriously; publicly, he professes it to his persecutors and to his fellow Jews, who take him to be their leader, but privately he admits to the audience, 'They say we are a scattered nation; I cannot tell', and deserts his co-religionists. His religious hypocrisy in the early scenes is matched by his pose as a Christian convert to trick the Friars later on.

It is important to note that Barabas's identity as a Jew, as perceived by both the play's Christians and by its Elizabethan audience, was not based only on theological belief. Jewishness was a racial and nationalistic category as well, increasingly recognized with the development of racial and

nationalistic discourses in the sixteenth century (Shapiro, pp. 167–94). The widely accepted notion that the Jews themselves remained racially pure down through the ages may be traced back to the curse the Bible ascribed to them for their role in the crucifixion: 'Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children' (Matt. 27: 25). This is brought up in the play, most notably in the counsel scene where one of the Maltese Knights says, 'If your first curse fall heavy on thy head, / And make thee poor and scorned of all the world, / 'Tis not our fault, but thy inherent sin' (*JM* 1.2.110–12). That Jews began to be considered more frequently in terms of nationhood as well as race is evident at a time when England and other European countries were defining their own sense of national identity and viewing the Jews both as a model of such nationhood (as illustrated in the Israelite people of the Old Testament) and a potential challenge. That threat was seen not only as social through intermarriage but economic as well. In the latter respect, the Jews were lumped together with other 'aliens' and 'strangers' in London, where riots and civil unrest arose over the perceived threat of foreign merchants and labourers to the livelihoods of London citizens, one series of incidents occurring in the spring of 1593, weeks after *The Jew* was staged at the Rose playhouse, and implicating Marlowe himself. As James Shapiro claims, 'Elizabethan theatergoers in 1593 would surely have been alert to how closely Barabas's activities in *The Jew of Malta* resembled those attributed to the dangerous aliens in their midst. Barabas is, after all, an alien merchant residing in the "Port-Town" of Malta who happily engrosses commodities into his own hands' (p. 184).

No less alienated in post-Reformation English society, of course, were Roman Catholics who, since the Excommunication of Queen Elizabeth by the Pope in 1570, were, along with Catholic priests and missionaries, subject to severe penalties and punishments for professing their faith. Whatever Marlowe's religious sympathies were (Baines's Marlowe favours Catholics and dismisses Protestants as 'Hypocriticall asses' (MacLure, p. 37)), in *The Jew of Malta* Catholicism is, like Judaism, represented as a false religion. Throughout the period Marlowe was writing plays in the 1580s and early 1590s, England was at war with Catholic nations abroad, most notably Spain (its Armada ignominiously defeated in 1588 when it attempted to invade England), and also Catholic principalities in France. Placed in opposition both to her villainous anti-Christian father and to the contemptible Catholic figures in the play is Barabas's daughter, Abigail. The sincerity and inward-centred nature of her faith contrast sharply with her father's dissembling and atheism and the Friars' avaricious, lecherous, and vow-breaking actions, which parody the Catholic formulae for spiritual regeneration: poverty, chastity, and obedience.[12] 'Witness that I dye a Christian', Abigail

declares before her death, to which Friar Bernadine replies, 'I, and a Virgin too, that grieves me most' (*JM* 3.6.41). This is one of many instances of the play's anti-Catholic satire directed at the lechery, greed, and duplicity of the Friars and the wholly corrupted institutions to which they and the nuns belong.

Marlowe's anti-Catholicism clearly extends to include Ferneze and the other monastic Knights of St John who, historically, took their directive from the Papacy and are consistently addressed as 'the Christians' by Barabas. Their sanctimonious remarks and self-righteousness in the early council-house scene with Barabas and the other Jews shows faint echoes of the Pharisees at the trial of Christ (Hunter, pp. 212–13), and while Ferneze may not have appeared as a complete religious charlatan to Elizabethan audiences, his acts of 'policy', breaking oaths with the Turks and with Barabas and invoking religious authority to exploit the Jews for their wealth and to advance Maltese interests in his relations with both the Catholic Spaniard and the Muslim Turk, suggest his kinship with Machievel as well. Certainly his triumphant remarks at the play's conclusion ('let due praise be given / Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven' [*JM* 5.5.122–23]) are to be taken ironically.

Religion, politics, and sectarian violence

Without doubt the most ferociously anti-Catholic rhetoric to be found in Marlowe's plays occurs in *The Massacre at Paris*, the title of which refers to the mass killing of French Huguenots (i.e., Protestants) in Paris and other cities in August and September 1572. The Guise, the play's Machiavellian villain, combines Barabas's malevolent glee with Tamburlaine's penchant for violence. His religious cynicism is revealed directly to the audience early on in his notorious 'My policy hath framed religion' speech (*MP* 1.2.62–6). This comes close to summing up the play's view of institutionalized Catholicism, an oppressive political system hiding behind the mask of true religion. The audience is repeatedly reminded (chiefly by the Duke himself) that the Guise, his brother the Cardinal of Lorraine, along with the Queen Mother, the Italian-descended Catherine de Medici, are plotting the eradication of Protestantism in the service of the Pope and King Philip of Spain, Europe's most powerful Catholic monarch. *The Massacre*'s scenes of murder are shocking in their graphic realism, made all the more so by the coarse, sardonic humour of the Catholic assassins as they stab to death their enemies, whose pleas for mercy evoke sympathy and horror.

Recent criticism questions earlier opinion that *The Massacre* is simply a crude piece of Protestant propaganda, citing Marlowe's use of Catholic

sources to depict the murders of the Duke of Guise and his Cardinal brother which parallel murder of Protestants earlier in the play.[13] Unfortunately, because of the corrupt and truncated condition of the text, it is very difficult to know how much is missing from the play's twenty-four scenes and, in turn, what the complete, original play in performance involved. Certainly, even as it stands, the surviving text shows religiously motivated violence on both sides and raises questions already posed in the *Tamburlaine* plays and *The Jew of Malta* about the cynical exploitation of religious authority and religiously induced fear in the pursuit of military force and political power. Relevant, moreover, is that the Crown's military support of the Protestant Henry IV against French Catholics from 1589 onwards was unpopular.[14] Having said that, there is no indication here that Marlowe was balancing his criticism of opposing religious parties. From beginning to end, the play is rabidly anti-Catholic, and its depiction of sectarian violence is designed to excite and cater to the militant Protestantism which English audiences shared in the immediate aftermath of the failed Spanish Armada.

The politics of Church and state

The tumultuous mixing of politics and religion is explored in a somewhat different way in *Edward II*. A nation's horrific descent into civil war is a theme Marlowe had addressed in his verse translation of *Lucan's First Book*, a work which betrays republican sympathies and a measure of scepticism about the role of providential intervention in human (and political) affairs.[15] Religion, nevertheless, was very much a part of the sixteenth-century debate over the right to resist constituted authority, particularly the authority of deeply corrupt or tyrannical monarchs. In England, the theory that under intolerable circumstances the governing class could lead a revolt against evil (read Catholic) kingship was developed by Protestant exiles during the Catholic reign of Elizabeth's elder sister Mary, and it found endorsement in one of the best-selling books of Marlowe's day, Calvin's *Institution of the Christian Religion*. This highly influential book was translated into English by Thomas Norton, the author of the Senecan tragedy *Gorboduc* (1561), itself a play which advocated a central role for Parliament and the aristocracy in monarchical government. In the heated political climate of the 1580s and early 1590s, any public sentiment justifying armed resistance to the monarch became associated with Jesuit plots to overthrow Elizabeth, but there is no question that these ideas were circulating on the Puritan left as well as on the Catholic right, and the fact that Edward II's deposition scene (unlike its counterpart in Shakespeare's *Richard II*) was not

suppressed by censorship, not to mention the repeated treatment of the subject in history plays, indicates that some degree of discussion was at least tolerated.[16]

What is particularly intriguing in *Edward II*, however, is the Church's role in the challenge to kingly rule. Very early in the play, the Bishop of Coventry strenuously objects to the return of the exiled Gaveston, with the result that the king and his friend strip the bishop of his vestments, cast him into a ditch, and divest him of his title and possessions. It is this incident which precipitates the play's first major movement, the barons and the Church joining forces with the queen to banish Gaveston's presence and subsequent appointments of office at the royal court. To an Elizabethan audience fully conscious of Elizabeth's own excommunication by the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury's threat to Edward that unless the king banishes Gaveston he, in his role as papal legate, will absolve the barons of allegiance to the throne must have been particularly contemptible, and it precipitates Edward's subsequent tirade against the Church in Act 1, scene 4 (Heinemann, p. 183). Here, as in the Vatican scenes in *Doctor Faustus* where, in the 'B' text version, the conflict between Pope Adrian and the Emperor's election of an alternative pope is shown, the rivalry between Church and state for political power is dramatized, with the implicit condemnation of the intervention of ecclesiastical authorities in secular rule.

The great wealth, opulent lifestyle, lavish vestments, and elaborate ceremonials of the prelates in the Vatican scenes of 'A' and 'B' text versions of *Doctor Faustus* explicitly target the Pope's court at Rome, but it is not irrelevant that these were precisely the evils associated with *English* bishops in a series of unlicensed pamphlets known as *The Martin Marprelate Tracts* published around the time *Doctor Faustus* probably was first staged (1588–90). In England, the episcopal system of ecclesiastical polity was essentially intact from the pre-Reformation Church; its leader, Archbishop Whitgift, was widely despised for his secular role on the queen's Privy Council, which he used to persecute (and eventually to crush) militant Puritans who wished to replace episcopacy with a more democratically oriented church polity known as Presbyterianism. It is now widely accepted that the commercial theatre participated in the Marprelate controversy, so much so that the government intervened temporarily to suppress plays in London in November 1589, with a warning to the company associated with Marlowe himself, the Lord Admiral's Men. Other author/playwrights participated (John Lyly and Thomas Nashe certainly, Anthony Munday and Robert Greene probably), apparently on the side of the bishops, but we have no way of knowing whether Marlowe was involved. However, the anti-prelate scenes in *Doctor Faustus* and *Edward II* would have resonated with the large contingent of

Puritan sympathizers in attendance at amphitheatre performances in the late 1580s and early 1590s.[17]

Religion, politics, and censorship

Apart from the Vatican scenes, *Doctor Faustus* is perhaps the least overtly political, and the most explicitly religious, of Marlowe's plays, but in the tumultuous climate of the 1580s and 1590s when activism against the doctrinal and ecclesiastical teachings of the Church of England constituted a crime against the state, the play's provocative representation of religious dissidence, however inscribed within the tragedy's morality play framework with its edifying Prologue and Epilogue, may well have been perceived as politically subversive. Sceptical of religious orthodoxy, Faustus thinks hell's a fable and contemptuously dismisses the pains of the afterlife as 'trifles and mere old wives' tales' ('A' text 2.1.129, 137).[18] Moreover, he is inclined to side with the Evil Angel who regards contrition, prayer, and repentance as 'illusions, fruits of lunacy, / That make men foolish that do trust them most' ('A' text 2.1.18–19). Divinity, he says, is 'basest' of the learned professions, 'Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile' ('A' text 1.1.110–11), and promptly dismisses it to pursue magic chiefly because of the notions of original sin and predestination ('A' text 1.1.37–50), cornerstone doctrines of the Elizabethan Church, the latter so important to Archbishop Whitgift's view of Protestant theology that he petitioned the queen (unsuccessfully it turned out) to have a more explicit, detailed statement about predestination included in the Church's official articles of religion.[19] And perhaps most shockingly, in a parody of Christ's final words on the cross, Faustus concludes his soul-selling pact with Lucifer with the utterance, '*Consummatum Est*' ('It is finished') ('A' text 1.4.74).

The Elizabethan government was too busy hunting down Jesuit missionaries and fanatical Puritans to concern itself with intellectual atheism, but it was sufficiently sensitive to public advocacy of its opinions to summon Marlowe himself for questioning. The Privy Council issued a warrant for his arrest on 18 May 1593, shortly after fellow playwright Thomas Kyd confessed to a document containing 'vile heretical conceits denying the deity of Jesus Christ our Saviour', which he claimed actually belonged to Marlowe with whom he lodged for a short time (MacLure, pp. 32–6). Both Kyd and the informer Richard Baines attributed to Marlowe a series of incriminating opinions. Among them were that the biblical account of Adam's creation six thousand years ago is historically untenable, that Moses was 'a juggler' who filled the Israelites' hearts with superstition, and that Christ was a bastard. 'The first beginning of Religion', Baines reports Marlowe as saying, 'was

only to keep men in awe', and 'if he were to write a new Religion, he would vndertake both a more Excellent and Admirable methode and that all the new testament is filthily written' (MacLure, pp. 36–7). We will never know to what extent these statements represent Marlowe's own views, but they are sufficiently close to the anti-Christian sentiment expressed in *Doctor Faustus* to raise the question of whether the play was subject to state censorship.

Over the past century, many critics have argued that *Doctor Faustus* was indeed directly censored by the government, and they have offered this as an explanation for the broad discrepancies between the so-called 'A' text (published 1604) and the considerably longer 'B' text (published 1616). The most elaborate claim for state intervention is by William Empson, who argued that the Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney (the court-appointed regulator of dramatic entertainments), initially licensed *Doctor Faustus* but then, in discovering its heretical implications in performance (which included the magician being saved from damnation) and feeling pressure from the newly formed Licensing Commission of 1589 involving the Archbishop of Canterbury and the London city council, extensively cut offending passages and scenes; this resulted in the 'A' text, a truncated version used for provincial touring. Subsequently, the impresario Philip Henslowe was able to get Tilney to restore much of Marlowe's original text, and hence the 'B' text, which, Empson surmises, was performed by the Admiral's Men through the 1590s.[20] Empson offers no convincing evidence to support this hypothesis, and it has now been largely discredited by Bevington and Rasmussen's more plausible reconstruction of the textual history, with the 'A' text close to Marlowe's 'foul papers' (original script), and the 'B' text a consequence of additions Henslowe commissioned in 1602.[21] Empson was following the commonly held assumption that state regulation of theatre, particularly in policing religious expression, was heavy-handed and repressive, an assumption that persists in criticism, much of it new historicist, which sees Marlowe engaging in self-censorship as a means of avoiding the supposed draconian measures imposed on dissident playwrights, even as he obliquely conveys the subversive, atheistic ideas given explicit expression in the Baines Note. Thus Catherine Minshull sees *Doctor Faustus* avoiding censorship measures by way of a 'rebellious subtext' in which 'the exercise of absolutist authority [is portrayed] as repressive, entrenched, unjust, and implacable'.[22]

There is perhaps some truth to the claim that Marlowe knew his limits in terms of what he could and could not stage before a popular audience (and before the watchful eye of the Master of the Revels), but as Richard Dutton has so convincingly shown in his review of censorship issues and *Doctor Faustus*, there simply was no elaborate machinery of state regulation which imposed repressive measures on the Elizabethan stage (Dutton, pp. 62–9). To

be sure, proclamations dating back to the opening years of the queen's reign proposed severe restrictions on the expression of religious issues in plays, but it is quite clear from the numerous religious interludes and biblical plays on record for performance and publication throughout the period that these were not seriously enforced. Moreover, the frequently cited Licensing Commission of 1589, prompted by the Marprelate controversy, in which officers from the court, the City, and the Church were charged with perusing all plays for the purpose of striking out all matters relating to divinity and state, was never heard from after the controversy ended around 1590. What we can conclude, therefore, is that playwrights like Marlowe actually had considerable latitude in what they could represent in their plays, and it proved only to be in times of serious political crisis – notably the Marprelate controversy and the later Essex rebellion of 1601 – that severe measures were imposed. This helps to explain, moreover, how Lord Strange's Men in the early 1590s could include in its repertory Marlowe's anti-Catholic *The Massacre at Paris* alongside *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, a play about a Catholic heretic executed for opposing Henry VIII's act of royal supremacy.[23]

Religion, politics, and sexuality

If Archbishop Whitgift did not manage to censor Marlowe's writings as a member of the Licensing Commission of 1589, he succeeded a decade later, almost six years to the day after the playwright's death on 30 May 1593, by way of a proclamation known as the Bishops' Order. Co-ordered by Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London, the proclamation, issued on 1 June 1599, banned the publication of all satires and epigrams and ordered the burning of nine specifically selected books in the Stationers' Hall, one of which contained forty-eight of Sir John Davies's epigrams and ten of Marlowe's translations of Ovid's elegies from the *Amores*. Whitgift's purpose, expressed in an earlier 1596 order of High Commission, was to censor books of 'Ribaldry . . . superstition . . . and flat heresie' by which English subjects are allured 'to wantonness, corrupted in doctrine', and provoked into civil disobedience.[24] Marlowe's translation certainly fits these criteria. The frank eroticism of the *Amores* reflects Marlowe's refusal to follow precedent in 'Christianizing' Ovid. Indeed, several of the elegies are provocatively anti-religious, though some were omitted from the Marlowe–Davies book. 'God is a name, no substance, feared in vain, / And doth the world in fond belief detain', reads Elegy 3 from Book 3.[25] 'Or if there be a God', reads the next line, 'he loves fine wenches' (line 25). Elegy 8 from Book 3 states that 'When bad fates take good men, I am forbod / But secret thoughts to think there is a god' (35–6). Interestingly, Marlowe translates 'deos' (gods) as 'god'

and emboldens the meaning of the original to accentuate its provocativeness (Leech, p. 32).

All of Marlowe's classically inspired love poetry and drama, i.e. the Ovidian *Amores* and *Hero and Leander*, and the Virgilian *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, comically defy Christian standards of sexual morality at the same time as they travesty the Christian, and specifically Protestant, notions of the sovereignty and complete transcendence of the godhead. However, if the poems revel in the sexual licence which pagan religion sanctions and the multitude of gods practise – one thinks of Jupiter doting over Ganymede as the boy sits on his lap; Neptune's equally homoerotic pursuit of Leander in the Hellespont – they also frequently remind us of the darker implications of erotic desire. As Claude Summers perceptively remarks with respect to Marlowe's treatment of homosexuality: 'What is most noteworthy about Marlowe's depiction of same-sex relations is that his posture is consistently oppositional *vis-à-vis* his society's official condemnation of homosexuality as sodomitical even as that condemnation inevitably and powerfully shapes his varied representations.'[26] This is very important as we turn our attention to *Edward II*, where Christian discourse defining same-sex physical relations as sodomy (the term derives from the Old Testament city of Sodom, a place of sexual vice), evoked in the horrific murder scene with its parody of physical sex between males, clashes with an Ovidian discourse of homoerotic play and desire characterizing the intimate exchanges between Edward and Gaveston. Until very recently, critics have tended to emphasize the former without sufficiently recognizing the importance of the latter in the play's representation of sexuality.

In considering *Edward II*'s complex mix of religion, politics, and sexuality, it is worth briefly comparing the play's climactic death scene with those in Marlowe's other tragedies. Certainly the tortuous deaths of the other villain–heroes, Faustus 'All torn asunder' by devils ('B' text), the multiple stabbing of the Guise, the boiling of Barabas in the cauldron of hot oil (a familiar medieval image of hell), cater to conventional notions of God's retribution for a life of sin. In this respect Marlowe is following Fulke Greville's dictate that tragedy's purpose is 'to point out God's revenging aspect upon every particular sin, to the despair or confusion of mortality'.[27] In *Edward II*, however, the king's murder by the insertion of a hot spit into his anus is the most shocking of all Marlowe's death scenes. We may ask, is this execution also to be perceived as divinely decreed, in this instance as the suitably prescribed punishment for sodomy? Or is it perhaps nothing more than the avenging act of Mortimer and Isabella?[28] As with the death of Tamburlaine after a sudden illness, Marlowe problematizes this conclusion as an example of divine justice in a play which many believe to be his most naturalistic

depiction of human experience. *Edward II* contains no moralizing prologue or epilogue, and while the play stages state–Church conflicts, its characters are conspicuously free of the religious rhetoric exhibited in the other major tragedies. Edward's wretched final hours starkly contrast with Faustus's in that he does not dwell on his impending spiritual fate; there is little remorse for sin, and certainly no regrets about his relationship with Gaveston – however politically and personally disastrous its consequences, and it is only moments before his murder that he prays, 'Assist me, sweet God, and receive my soul!' (*EII* 5.5.108). Indeed, Edward's most passionate outcry amidst the stench, filth, and cold of the castle sewer is reserved for his beloved Gaveston, in whose cause he sees his impending death as a martyr's act of sacrifice: 'O Gaveston, it is for thee that I am wronged; / For me, both thou and both the Spencers died / And for their sakes a thousand wrongs I'll endure' (*EII* 5.3.41–3). On the one hand, Marlowe inherited a narrative from his historical sources in which Edward's passionate relationship with Gaveston leads providentially to 'a form of punishment that reenacts the sin it punishes'.[29] On the other hand, the absence of the transcendent in this tragedy, the very strong sense that the relentless pursuit of power and wilful self-destruction are what shape the characters' destiny, raises compelling questions about the use of a violent, sadistic killing as moralized example and a providentially ordained act.

Marlowe's political religion

All discussions of Marlowe's writings, at one point or another, lead back to the author himself. No poet–playwright of the Elizabethan age is more deeply implicated in his work than Marlowe; this is a historical constant of Marlovian scholarship despite theoretical assaults on the notion of autonomous authorship and the questions of collaboration surrounding the plays. Of course, we can never get back to the 'real' Marlowe and see inside his mind, but it is a useful exercise to speculate about what he believed and how he felt about religion, if only as a means of drawing some general conclusions about what his plays and poems collectively communicate to contemporary audiences and to us today on this complex topic. Although they are voices one step removed from Marlowe's own, the Marlovian persona of the Baines Note and the narrator of Ovid's Elegy 3.3 articulate a materialist, if not highly political, sense of religion and God: 'the first beginning of Religioun was only to keep men in awe', Baines's Marlowe asserts, and 'God is a name, no substance, feared in vain', Ovid's narrator claims (MacLure, p. 37; Elegy 3.3.23). However, the plays are more ambiguous than this. Is Sigismund's humiliating defeat an act of divine

retribution for violating his oath with Christ, or is it a mere consequence of war?

What Marlowe does show is that religion is a potent and potentially destructive weapon in the hands of political leaders. Tamburlaine, Ferneze, and the Guise all illustrate how senseless acts of cruelty, greed, selfishness, and injustice can be carried out in the name of God and true religion; in the cases of Tamburlaine and the Guise, the exploitation seems self-conscious, while with Ferneze it is not so clear. Marlowe, at least in the poignant case of Barabas's genuinely pious daughter Abigail, effectively raises the question of why God allows bad things to happen to good people. Abigail, perhaps the only godly, sympathetic character in the play, is victimized by both her father and her supposed spiritual mentors before she dies of poison, reminding one once again of Marlowe's Ovid: 'Live godly, thou shalt die; though honour heaven, / Yet shall thy life be forcibly bereaven' (*JM* 3.8.35–6).

Critics have perceived this questioning of Protestant notions of divine justice elsewhere in Marlowe,[30] as we have noted its implications for transgressive sexuality in *Edward II*. In the cases of Friars Bernadine and Jacomo, Marlowe seems to suggest that the corrupt institutions they serve and the unrealistic vows they are required to follow inevitably result in hypocrisy and a disparity between religious ideals and practices. At the same time, as G. K. Hunter insightfully remarks, if Marlowe 'was an atheist in the modern sense at all, he was a God-haunted atheist', who especially in *Doctor Faustus* but also at moments in the other plays suggests a passionate identification with the experiences of remorse, fear of damnation, repentance, and worship. This was the religious culture of Marlowe's Cambridge, and given that intensely devout Catholics engaged in similar self-scrutiny and spiritual introspection, this was also part of the world he entered when visiting Catholic colleges abroad.

NOTES

1. *Tamburlaine the Great, Part One*, in *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, Mark Thornton Burnett (ed.), Everyman (London: Dent, 1999), p. 135 (5.1.181 and 183). In this chapter all subsequent references to this and other plays by Marlowe are taken from Burnett's edition and appear parenthetically in the text.
2. See John Calvin, *The Institution of the Christian Religion*, Thomas Norton (trans.) (1561; rpt London, 1582), 1: xvii; William Perkins, *The Workes* (London, 1608), 1: 160 and 164. The notion is pervasive in Thomas Beard's Elizabethan pamphlet, *The Theatre of Gods Judgement* (London, 1648).
3. The only known performance was before the queen in King's College Chapel, Cambridge, in August 1564. See Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage and Playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 142–6.

4. Robert Greene, in reference to *Tamburlaine* in 1588, condemns Marlowe for 'daring God out of heauen with that Atheist Tamburlan' (MacLure, p. 29).
5. For the Muslim King of Morocco's affection for England because of its religion, see Rami Jaradat, 'Redefining the Role of the Turks in Elizabethan Literature', PhD Dissertation, Purdue University, 2002, chapter 1; and Simon Shepherd, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 141–5.
6. For English prayers for the Maltese, see Andrew P. Vella, *An Elizabethan–Ottoman Conspiracy* (Valetta, Malta: Royal University of Malta Press, 1972), p. 14; cited in 'Introduction', *The Jew of Malta*, Roma Gill (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. xii.
7. 'Turkish *Tamberlaine*' is how Joseph Hall describes Marlowe's hero in his verse satire, 'Virgidemiarum' (1597–8); see MacLure, p. 40. For Tamburlaine and the Turks, see Shepherd, *Marlowe*, pp. 142–69; and Jaradat, 'Redefining the Role of the Turks'.
8. For a succinct introduction to the play, see 'Introduction to *The Jew of Malta*', in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, David Bevington, et al. (eds.) (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 287–92.
9. Cited in James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 38.
10. See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 3: 424–5.
11. See G. K. Hunter, 'The Theology of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*', *JWCI* 28 (1964), 211–40.
12. The Elizabethan Homilies of 1563 condemned 'the three chief principal points, which they called the three essentials (or three chief foundations) of religion, that is to say, obedience, chastity and willful poverty'. See Michael Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580–1625* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 61.
13. The most influential of these commentaries is Julia Briggs, 'Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*: a Reconsideration', *RES* 34 (1983), 257–78.
14. See R. B. Wernham, *After the Armada: Elizabethan England and the Struggle for Western Europe 1588–1595* (Oxford University Press, 1984); Curtis Breight, *Surveillance, Militarism and Drama in the Elizabethan Era* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), p. 114.
15. For discussions of Marlowe's Lucan, see Patrick Cheney, *Marlowe's Counterfeit Profession: Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood* (University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 227–37; and Clifford Leech, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet for the Stage*, Anne Lancashire (ed.) (New York: AMS, 1980), pp. 33–5.
16. See Margot Heinemann, 'Political Drama', in A. R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 1990): pp. 161–205; qtd from pp. 182–4.
17. For the players' involvement in the Marprelate controversy, see Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 52–4; Richard Dutton, *Licensing, Censorship, and Authorship in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 74–6; and Charles Nicholl, *A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 64–79.

18. For convenience, I quote mainly from the 'A' text of 1604. For further discussion of the 'A' and 'B' texts, see the chapters by Laurie Maguire and Thomas Healy in the present volume, pp. 41–54 and 174–92.
19. These came to be known as the Lambeth articles published in 1596. See *The Works of John Whitgift*, ed. John Ayre, 3 vols., Parker Society (Cambridge, 1851), 3: 612.
20. William Empson, *Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-Book and Marlowe's 'Dr Faustus'* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
21. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (eds.), 'Introduction,' *'Doctor Faustus' A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)* (Manchester University Press, 1993).
22. Catherine Minshull, 'The Dissident Sub-Text of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*', *English* 39 (1990), 193–207; qtd from p. 205.
23. See Andrew Gurr, *Shakespearean Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 263–4.
24. See Ian Frederick Moulton, '"Printed Abroad and Uncastrated": Marlowe's *Elegies* with Davies' *Epigrams*', in Paul Whitfield White (ed.), *Marlowe, History, and Sexuality: New Critical Essays on Christopher Marlowe* (New York: AMS Press, 1998), pp. 77–90; qtd from p. 77.
25. *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Poems and Translations*, Stephen Orgel (ed.) (New York: Penguin, 1971), p. 166 (lines 23–4).
26. Claude Summers, '*Hero and Leander*: the Arbitrariness of Desire', in J. A. Downie and J. T. Parnell (eds.), *Constructing Christopher Marlowe* (Cambridge University Press), pp. 133–47; qtd from p. 134.
27. Cited in Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 217.
28. See Charles R. Forker's discussion of the criticism in his edition of *Edward the Second* (Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 92–9.
29. I quote David Bevington in his 'Introduction to *Edward II*', in *English Renaissance Drama*. Bevington, et al. (eds.), p. 356.
30. See, for example, Bevington and Rassmussen (eds.), *Doctor Faustus*, pp. 30–1.

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