

“Scorning both god and his ministers”: at the Origins of Marlowe’s Atheism

CRISTIANO RAGNI

UNIVERSITÀ DI VERONA

For most of his adult life, Christopher Marlowe found himself at the centre of insistent rumours about his “damnable Judgment of Religion.” These rumours were spread by a series of notorious documents, which were produced for the most part within a surprisingly short of period of time in May 1593, and whose circulation may have contributed to the author’s untimely and still mysterious death in a tavern brawl in Deptford on 30 May 1593.¹ Not to mention the fact that Marlowe’s “subversive” approach to the text *par excellence*, the Scriptures, as it emerged from those documents could also be found between the lines of his successful theatrical and poetical output. Maybe unsurprisingly, therefore, Marlowe was expunged from the English literary canon between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, known as they were for their exaltation of stylistic and moral *decorum*,² until he was rediscovered by the Romantics. Again unsurprisingly, it was precisely the aura of subversiveness that hovered around his name—even more than the actual quality of his almost-forgotten works—which led to the Romantics’ renewed interest in him, as well as to his definitive legitimation in the twentieth century.³ The “construction of Marlowe as a political subversive,” Mark Burnett noted, “gained a wide currency” in that later century, ending up including “the categories of subjectivity, sexuality, religion, and poetics.”⁴ Of course, the studies produced around the most “sensational” aspects of Marlowe’s life—such as his atheism—have helped to shed light on both the man and the artist. However, often discussed without considering the specific historical and cultural contexts of late Elizabethan

¹ For Marlowe’s biography, see, among others, Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe, Renaissance Dramatist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); and David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004).

² On the (mis)fortune of Marlowe’s dramas between the seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries, see Thomas Dabbs, *Reforming Marlowe: The Nineteenth-Century Canonization of a Renaissance Dramatist* (London: Associated University Presses, 1991), 24–49; and two contributions in Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (eds), *Christopher Marlowe in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): Holger Schott Syme, “Marlowe in his Moment,” 275–84, and Lucy Munro, “Marlowe in Caroline Theatre,” 296–305.

³ On Marlowe’s reception from the Romantic Age to the present, see Patrick Cheney, “Introduction: Marlowe in the twenty-first century,” in Patrick Cheney, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–23; and Richard Wilson, “Specters of Marlowe: The State of the Debt and the Work of Mourning,” in *Christopher Marlowe at 450*, ed. Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 227–56.

⁴ Mark Burnett is quoted in Cheney, “Introduction,” 10.

England, Marlowe's biography and works have risked being used to signify everything and the opposite of everything.⁵

For this reason, in the following pages I will go back to the 1593 documents denouncing Marlowe's "subversive" approach to the Scriptures, and besides underscoring the similarities with ideas that can be gleaned from some of his most successful dramas, such as the *Tamburlaine* plays, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris*, I will also set them against the background of the early philosophical opposition to Christianity, as well as the religious and political debates which animated early modern Europe. In so doing, far from being the mere provocations of a brilliant (if impudent) outcast, or the allegations of dubious government informers, Marlowe's anti-Christian opinions will emerge as an articulate and coherent belief system, which does indeed echo both the theses defended by pre-eminent opposers of the early Christians, such as Celsus, Arius, Porphyry of Tyre, or Julian the Apostate, and the "heretic" theories discussed by Niccolò Machiavelli in his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* and Giordano Bruno in his *Dialoghi Filosofici*. Placing Marlowe's "damnable" opinions on religion within this century-old discourse will thus allow me to argue that, if Marlowe may be deemed subversive, it is not so much because he contravened the official religious *status quo* of his age, but because he carried out the attempt—this one truly impudent—to reveal to many one of the fundamental *arcana imperii*: that is, that religions did not have to be or pretend to be true, and their function merely had to be to keep peoples together.

Alarming rumours on Marlowe's religious allegiance—and specifically his Catholic sympathies—started circulating while he was still a student at Cambridge, when he probably became involved in the activities of the spy network created by William Cecil, Lord Burghley, to protect Elizabeth I's life, and skilfully managed at the time by her powerful Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham. This is at least what the famous letter sent by the Privy Council to the authorities of Cambridge University in 1587 seems to imply: clearing Marlowe's name of the accusations of going over to the Catholic enemies, the councillors attested that he had been employed "in matters touching the benefit of his country."⁶ If being suspected of Catholic sympathies were not enough, once in London Marlowe started to be repeatedly accused of being a relentless blasphemer and an atheist. These accusations coalesced in a series of often-quoted documents, which accompanied Marlowe from his arrival in the capital to his death in Deptford. Already in 1588, for instance, in the preface to

⁵ Wilson, "Specters of Marlowe," 227–56.

⁶ Riggs, *The World*, 180–82.

his *Perimedes the Blacksmith*, the (jealous) playwright Robert Greene condemned the “impious” work of his much more fortunate colleague, and accused him of “[...] daring God out of heauen with that Atheist Tamburlan.”⁷ So concerned was Greene about Marlowe’s atheism that, still in 1592, while on his deathbed, he is said to have begged him to repent for having denied the existence of God.⁸

More interesting, however, are the reports produced and circulated in May 1593. On 5 May, an anonymous libelist—famously signed Tamburlaine—accused the foreigners living in London of exercising “vsery [...] like the Jewes” thus “leav[ing the English] all for deade,” and therefore threatened, among other things, to shed more foreign blood than any “Paris massacre” had done.⁹ That their intention was to involve Marlowe in a serious case of public unrest is quite evident. It is also evident that the libelist gave voice to dangerous ideas that opposed the political line of the government, which was discussing a law aimed at granting further privileges to foreign merchants—a law which had been firmly contested a few months before by none other than Sir Walter Raleigh, Elizabeth I’s former favourite, at the time in disgrace following his unauthorized marriage with Elizabeth Throckmorton. In other words, the Dutch Church libel, as the document is known, put controversial features of Marlowe’s plays and Raleigh’s dissident opinions together, in the likely attempt to drag both of them down. These accusations found fertile ground not only because of the generally paranoid political climate of late Elizabethan England,¹⁰ but also because this was not the first time that both Marlowe and Raleigh had been openly accused of political and/or religious “subversiveness.”¹¹

The Royal Commissioners sent to investigate the Dutch Church episode immediately searched the lodgings of the various suspects. In playwright Thomas Kyd’s room, they found handwritten pages reporting Arius’ heretic opinions on the human nature of Jesus Christ

⁷ Robert Greene, *Perimedes the Blacksmith* (London: 1588), A3.

⁸ Greene’s confession is quoted in Nicholas Davidson, “Christopher Marlowe and Atheism,” in *Christopher Marlowe and English Renaissance Culture*, ed. Darryll Grantley and Peter Roberts (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), 129.

⁹ See Arthur Freeman, “Marlowe, Kyd, and the Dutch Church Libel,” *English Literary Renaissance* 3, no. 1 (1973): 44–52, and Riggs, *The World*, 318–30.

¹⁰ See Chloe K. Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism: Politic Religion and Post Reformation Polemic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 6–9.

¹¹ Much has been written on the association between Marlowe and Raleigh. Apart from the seminal works E. A. Strathmann, *Sir Walter Raleigh: A Study in Elizabethan Scepticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) and Pierre Lefranc, *Sir Walter Raleigh écrivain: l’oeuvre et les idées* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin 1968), see also more recent publications, such as Riggs, *The World*, 322–28; Thomas Healy, “Marlowe’s Biography,” in Bartels and Smith, *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, 334–45; or Constance Brown Kuriyama, “Marlowe’s Biography: Fact, Inference, Conjecture, and Speculation,” in Deats and Logan, *Christopher Marlowe at 450*, 327–39, and the works cited in these contributions.

copied from John Proctor's *The Fall of the Great Arian* (1549). Put under arrest and tortured, Kyd confessed—as is testified by one of the two letters he would later send to Lord Puckering, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal—that those pages belonged to Marlowe. He also added that it was Marlowe's custom to “iest at the divine scriptures,” suggesting for instance that St Paul was but a “Jugler,” that St John was “o[u]r savior Christes Alexis,” and that “the things esteemed to be donn by devine power might have aswell been don by observation of men.”¹² Inevitably, this resulted in Marlowe being summoned by the Privy Council on 18 May: probably thanks to Cecil's protection, however, he was released and only “commanded to give daily attendance.”¹³

Undoubtedly the most famous of the 1593 documents is the Note that Richard Baines delivered to Lord Puckering on 27 May, three days before the Deptford brawl. An informer working for the government, Baines reported Marlowe's “Damnable Judgment of Religion, and scorn of god[es] word” in detail, ranging from his mocking dismissal of the implausible chronology of the world as reported in the Scriptures to his vehement attacks against Moses, whom he also considered “a Jugler,” who “being brought up in all the art[es] of the Egiptians” could thus easily “abuse the Jewes being a rude & grosse people.” Echoing Kyd's confession, Baines declared that Marlowe had also stated that “Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest,” and that “S^t John the Evangelist was bedfellow to C[hrist].” Always (according to him) “scorning both god and his ministers,” Marlowe reportedly believed that “all protestant[es]” were “HypoCriticall asses,” and most significantly that “if there be any god or any good Religion, then it is in the papist[es] because the service of god is perform[ed] w[i]th more Ceremonies, as Elevation of the mass, organs, singing men, Shaven Crownes, &cra.”¹⁴ Besides listing this long series of blasphemies, Baines revealed that Marlowe had even managed to convert one Richard Cholmeley to atheism, on the grounds that “a certain Harriot, man of Sir Walter Raleigh” was able to perform tricks better than those of Moses himself. Again: Marlowe and Raleigh were put together.¹⁵

This brings us to the last key text, the “Remembrances of words and matters against Richard Cholmeley,” an anonymous report probably authored by Thomas Drury, another

¹² For Thomas Kyd's letters to Lord Puckering, see British Library *Harley MS.* 6848 f.154 and British Library *Harley MS.* 6849 f.218. See also Rebekah Owens, “Thomas Kyd and the Letters to Puckering,” *Notes & Queries* 53, no. 4 (2006): 458–61.

¹³ Riggs, *The World*, 325.

¹⁴ All references to the Baines Notes are from the transcriptions made available online by the British Library. 18 February 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/accusations-against-christopher-marlowe-by-richard-baines-and-others>.

¹⁵ See Susanne S. Webb, “Raleigh, Harriot, and Atheism in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 1 (1969): 10–18, and Riggs, *The World*, 315–37.

dubious intelligence agent, and this too sent to Lord Puckering in those same days.¹⁶ Apart from repeating the mentioned “Jeste of the Scripture” that Marlowe used to make, this report particularly insisted on presenting Marlowe as a threat to England’s political and religious order. Marlowe, it can be read, “speaketh in general all evill of the Counsell” and, most worryingly, “purposes to drawe her Ma[jes]^{[t]ie[s]} subiect[es] to bee Athiest[es].”¹⁷ In this regard, the “Remembrances” asserted that Cholmeley had confirmed Marlowe’s ability “to showe more sounde reasons for Atheisme then any divine in England is able to geve to prove divinitie,” as well as the fact that he had “read the Atheist lecture to S[i]r Walter Ralieghe & others.”

Of course, in the sixteenth century accusations of atheism such as these could be merely used as an easy way to smear enemies, and from this point of view the mentioned reports repeat some of the allegations which could be found in other documents of the time and that had been exploited for this very purpose.¹⁸ In Marlowe’s case, however, the situation appears to be slightly different. It is true that the cross-references to people Marlowe may have known and activities he may have been involved in do seem to be fabricated so as to implicate him in some subterfuge intended to slander Raleigh, probably at the instigation of the ambitious (and envious) Earl of Essex, and for this reason, doubts have been often cast on the reliability of these documents.¹⁹ However, fabrication does not exclude the possibility that they were telling the truth. In this regard, the Baines Note is particularly revealing. That it cannot have been simply the fruit of Baines’s slanderous mind, as has been often argued, is now a widely-held opinion.²⁰ If Kyd could have been convinced to say anything under torture and the author of the “Remembrances” could have had no scruple to sully Marlowe’s all but pristine reputation, the fact that Baines worked in the same intelligence system in which Marlowe himself was involved, and continued to do so after the playwright’s death, seemingly proves that his powerful employers must have considered him reliable: “[A]n

¹⁶ See Charles Nicholl, “Scribblers and Assassins,” *London Review of Books* 24, no. 21 (2002). 18 February 2023. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v24/n21/charles-nicholl/scribblers-and-assassins>, accessed 17 March 2024.

¹⁷ All references to the “Remembrances” are from the transcriptions made available online by the British Library. 18 February 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/accusations-against-christopher-marlowe-by-richard-baines-and-others>. In this regard, see also Riggs, *The World*, 325–26.

¹⁸ In this regard, see for instance Davidson, “Christopher Marlowe and Atheism,” 132, and Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism*, 1–4.

¹⁹ For a detailed reconstruction of the May 1593 events, see Cristiano Ragni, “Introduzione,” in Christopher Marlowe, *Il Massacro di Parigi*, a cura di Cristiano Ragni (Perugia: Morlacchi University Press, 2017), 29–59.

²⁰ See Davidson, “Christopher Marlowe and Atheism,” 129–47; Rosanna Camerlingo, *Teatro e Teologia: Marlowe, Bruno e i Puritani* (Napoli: Liguori, 1999); Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe*, 142–62; and Gilberto Sacerdoti, “Le dannabili opinioni di Christopher Marlowe: L’Anticristianesimo rinascimentale tra guerre di religione, nuova filosofia e fonti pagane,” *Rinascimento* 2, no. 56 (2016): 77–122.

informer who provided false or misleading information,” even the usually cautious Constance Brown Kuriyama admitted, “would soon be out of work, and Baines had apparently been working for Walsingham and the Privy Council at least since 1586. This probably indicates that he was reliable.”²¹ The most convincing argument, however, is undoubtedly the one brought up by Nicholas Davidson. In his analysis of Baines’s accusations, Davidson focused above all on the point in the Note, where Marlowe is reported to have claimed that Jesus Christ and St John were lovers; a “suggestion,” the scholar explained, that is “remarkably daring [...because] there seems to be no precedent for such a startling assertion in any other English records, nor in the anti-atheist literature.”²² If it is true that there was no English document reporting this blasphemy at the time, it is known however that, in 1550, one Fra Francesco Calcagno had been tried in Brescia, Italy, for having uttered this same blasphemy. Now, that Baines had heard stories about the trial of this friar minor is frankly unlikely, just as it would be inexplicable for him to have invented such an accusation, which basically added nothing to the other statements on the playwright’s atheism. One cannot but agree with Davidson, therefore, when he concludes that “the very rarity of this charge in any other English records is an indication of its authenticity.”²³

Exaggerated or concocted though they could have been, in other words, the 1593 documents likely report Marlowe’s personal belief on the Scriptures. Putting his “monstruous” opinions together, as they emerge from those documents, it appears evident that they delineate a coherent line of thought, and agree on four main points: 1) that Marlowe scorned the Scriptures for the implausibility of some of their assumptions, such as, for example, the chronology of the world, and that he thought that miracles could have entirely human/scientific explanations; 2) that he denied the divine nature of Christ, and presented his life not as a moral *exemplum*, but as the portrait of a libidinous sodomite; 3) that two pillars of Christianity such as Moses and St Paul were considered jugglers, who took advantage of the uncouthness of the people who trusted in their “superstitions”; and, 4) more generally, that he supported the theory of the imposture of religions. “The first beginning of religion,” point 9 of the Baines Note famously reads, “was only to keep men in awe.” That is also why, if one really had to choose, Catholics were more admirable than Protestants, because they preserved those “ceremonies,” which at least allowed for the “awe,” the wonder, of the faithful to be kept alive. Taken together, as Gilberto Sacerdoti put it, those documents reveal

²¹ Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe*, 133.

²² Davidson, “Christopher Marlowe and Atheism,” 141.

²³ Davidson, “Christopher Marlowe and Atheism,” 142.

“a visceral but reasoned hostility to the very concept of revealed religion that will emerge publicly only much later, but that was already in circulation at the end of the sixteenth century.”²⁴ Moreover, Marlowe’s desecrating ideas on Christianity voiced one of the oldest, and best-preserved *arcana imperii*: that religions did not have to be true, but only serve a pragmatic and social purpose.

Before moving on to show how the articulated and coherent anti-Christian thought that emerges from the 1593 documents is the same as that which can also be detected between the lines of Marlowe’s own plays, I would like to add something which has not been highlighted enough in Marlovian scholarship. Marlowe’s anti-Christian stance, mirroring as I argue a deep-seated conviction on his part rather than merely a series of fabricated allegations, is rooted in anti-Christian thought that was as ancient as Christianity itself, and circulated widely, although covertly, in early modern Europe. This was the belief of those philosophers who lived between the second and third centuries, such as Celsus, Arius, Porphyry of Tyre, and Julian the Apostate, who had profusely attacked the implausible and superstitious nature of the Christian religion in their works, and had immediately identified the potential extremism of what they saw as a dangerous sect.²⁵ In this regard, as we learn from Origen, it was Celsus who first accused the Early Christians of having founded a religious sect that acted like a secret society, a State within the State, which weakened the Roman Empire’s cohesion when it most needed it to oppose the Barbarians. Celsus considered Christians a *nosos*, a disease of the body politic, which had to be eradicated: “If everyone were to adopt the Christian’s attitude,” he argued, “there would be no rule of law: the legitimate authority would be abandoned; earthly things would return to chaos and come into the hands of the lawless and savage barbarians.”²⁶ In the Europe of the wars of religion, as will be shown below, this sectarianism would indeed explode in all its destructiveness and lead to the carnage which Marlowe would harshly criticize in his *Massacre at Paris*.

Moving on to a more theological level, Arius had elaborated instead a detailed critique of the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity, dismissing it as untenable. Heir to the nontrinitarian doctrines spread by Lucian and Paul of Samosata, Arius distinguished God the Father (“unbegotten”), who was the only true God, from the Son of God, who had been

²⁴ Sacerdoti, “Le dannabili opinioni,” 88 (trans. mine). See also Paul Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of his Thought, Learning and Character* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1946), 68.

²⁵ Pierre de Labriolle, *La réaction paienne: Étude sur la polémique antichrétienne du Ier au Vie siècle* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2005).

²⁶ Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 124.

evidently “begotten,” “for he is not eternal or co-eternal or equally self-sufficient (*sunagennetos*) with the Father.”²⁷ Arius’s Christ was therefore entirely human, just like Marlowe’s all-too-human Christ. After all, this was the same Arius whose opinions Marlowe transcribed—as Thomas Kyd declared—on those handwritten pages he had left in the room they had shared in London.²⁸

Unsurprisingly, both Celsus’s and Arius’s works were ordered to be burnt by Emperor Constantine after the Council of Nicaea (325). The same fate befell also Porphyry of Tyre’s *Against the Christians*, the most knowledgeable work written against Christianity in Antiquity.²⁹ Among several other accusations, which St. Jerome reported in his *Tract on Psalm 81*, Porphyry mocked St Paul and the early Christians for their superstitions, and suggested that “certain wonders” performed by Jesus and his followers “were worked with magical arts,” similarly to those employed by “the magicians in Egypt,” “Apollonius,” “Apuleius,” and several others.³⁰ Together with Apollonius and Apuleius, as noted above, Marlowe would put the mathematician and astronomer Thomas Harriot, who was the “intellectual father” of the Raleigh circle, and with his imagination and scientific curiosity greatly contributed to the spreading of the “new science” in England.³¹

Porphyry’s work was the main source for Julian the Apostate’s *Against the Galileans*, a polemical essay in which the Roman emperor described what he considered to be the mistakes and dangers of the Christian faith, and attempted to throw an unflattering light on the ongoing disputes inside the Christian Church. Obviously Julian did acknowledge the socio-political function of religions, but criticized the “Galileans” for showing what Marlowe’s Barabas, as will be discussed below, would attack on the Elizabethan stage as “unseen hypocrisy”: “Though it has in it nothing divine, by making full use of that part of the soul which loves fables and is childish and foolish, it [the fabrication of the Galileans] has induced men to believe that the monstrous tale is truth.”³² Moreover, that the aforementioned Robert Greene, as is known, advised Marlowe to abandon his “atheistic” views so as not to “perish as ill as Julian” testifies to the fact that the similarities between the Apostate’s work and Marlowe’s “opinions” had not escaped his contemporaries even before 1593.³³

²⁷ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2001), 271.

²⁸ See Riggs, *The World*, 324–30, 345–6.

²⁹ See de Labriolle, *La réaction paienne*, 242–43.

³⁰ Quoted in Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, ed. Robert M. Berchman (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 156–7.

³¹ See Matthias Schemmel, *The English Galileo: Thomas Harriot's Work on Motion as an Example of Preclassical Mechanics*, 2 vols. (London: Springer, 2008).

³² Julian, “Against the Galileans,” in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, vol. 3, ed. W.C. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1923), 319.

³³ Riggs, *The World*, 293–94.

These heretical ideas survived the definitive establishment of Christianity in Europe, and came to inform, for example, both the materialistic view of the cosmos in Averroes's heterodox interpretation of Aristotle, and the nominalism associated with William of Ockham and his followers.³⁴ Averroes's Aristotle, in particular, widely studied by both medieval philosophers and renowned humanists such as Pietro Pomponazzi, just to name one, postulated the eternity of nature, its irreducible materiality, and its continuous motion. Within a universe which was entirely regulated by immanent physical laws, there was no room for God's providential intervention.³⁵ Consequently, the tales of the Scriptures could not but be all lies, just as the early opposers of Christianity had claimed. In any case, Averroes's commentators concluded, those lies were useful and necessary, as religions had to be institutions with pedagogical and political purposes. This truth, however, had to be reserved for the learned ones, the philosophers "[...] qui soli sunt Dii terrestres" ("who are the only gods on earth"), as Pomponazzi put it in his *De Incantationibus*.³⁶ On the one hand, then, was the truth for the few, who had to pretend to believe the stories told in the Scriptures—that is, to "counterfeit [their] profession," as Marlowe's Barabas would argue—for their and the common good; on the other hand were the "fables" for the multitudes, who had to be governed.

This was the same thought, as is known, which would be later appropriated by those early modern "sceptics," that John Calvin had disparagingly defined "libertins" in his *Brieve instruction pour armer tout bon fidels contre les erreurs de la secte commune des Anabaptistes* (1544). Especially after the Reformation, as Sergio Bertelli explained in detail, those "libertins" could be found everywhere in the high circles of the princely courts and the universities of Europe.³⁷ In the France of the wars of religion, for instance, their heterodox belief underlay the political line brought about by the *politiques*, the moderate Catholics who hoped for the triumph of the Reason of State over the religious sectarianism that risked dissolving the French kingdom and Europe, as a whole.³⁸ "Marlowe's own brand of religious

³⁴ Artur Langraf, "Studien zur Theologie des Zwölften Jahrhunderts," *Traditio* 1 (1943): 183–222.

³⁵ Giorgio Spini, *Ricerca dei libertini: La teoria dell'impostura delle religioni nel Seicento italiano* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1983), 15–25.

³⁶ *Petri Pomponatii mantuani, summi et clarissimi suo tempore philosophi De naturalium effectuum causis, sive de Incantationibus: opus abstrusioris philosophiae plenum et brevissimis historiis illustratum atque ante annos XXXV compositum. Nunc primo vero in lucem fideliter editum/adiectis brevibus scholjs à Guglielmo Gratarolo Physico Bergomate, Basileae, per Henrichum Petri, augusto 1556*, 41. (trans. mine).

³⁷ Sergio Bertelli, ed., *Il libertinismo in Europa* (Napoli: Ricciardi, 1980), 3–24.

³⁸ On the *politiques* and their role in the French wars of religion, see among others John Hearsey McMill Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); L. Gambino, *I politiques e l'idea di sovranità* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1991); and Yves Charles Zarka, *Raison et déraison d'État: Théoriciens et theories de la raison d'État au XVIème et XVIIème siècle* (Paris: Puf, 1994).

doubt,” as Chloe K. Preedy has well summarized, “had much in common with this philosophical tradition of scepticism.”³⁹

That religions had nothing to do with truth, but should only be used to “maintain a well-ordered state,” moreover, was something that Niccolò Machiavelli too had clearly written in his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (*Discourses on Livy*), published in London in 1584 by John Wolfe, and in any case circulating in England also in French and Latin editions, as well as in manuscript English translations.⁴⁰ In Book II, Machiavelli had explicitly advocated the usefulness of the political use of religion—the same use to which the Roman king Numa Pompilius had resorted when he had pretended to be in conversation with a nymph so as to put an end to civil wars and thus legitimize his own reign:

[Numa], finding *a very savage people* and wishing to bring it to obey the laws by means of the arts of peace, turned to *religion as something altogether necessary if he wished to maintain a well-ordered state*. [He] pretended he was intimate with a nymph who advised him about what he was going to advise the people. He did so because he planned to introduce new and unwonted laws into the city, but feared that his own authority would not be enough (emphasis mine)⁴¹

The same use, in other words, that Elizabeth I herself—head of a very political State Church—was making of religion at Marlowe’s time, encouraging formal adherence to the Anglican cult while, in fact, claiming not to be interested in “mak[ing] windows into men’s hearts.”⁴² After all, as Patrick Collinson aptly summarized, “[...] with Elizabeth, the queen often obscured the believer and the woman, and her conduct of church was above all an act of statesmanship.”⁴³ Not to mention the political use of religion made by Henry of Navarre, the (not uncontested) hero of Marlowe’s *Massacre*, who would convert to Catholicism in 1594

³⁹ Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism*, 7.

⁴⁰ See Alessandra Petrina, *Machiavelli in the British Isles: Two Early Modern Translations of The Prince* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 1–46.

⁴¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 225. On Machiavelli’s idea of religion, see Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli: Storia del suo pensiero politico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980), 519–524; and more recently Michele Ciliberto, *Rinascimento* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2015), 51–55.

⁴² Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman, eds., *The Myth of Elizabeth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15. On Elizabeth I’s religious policy, see, among others, John Guy, “The Elizabethan Establishment and the Ecclesiastical Polity,” in *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the last Decade*, ed. John Guy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126–149; and Torrance Kirby, “The Elizabethan Church of England and the Origins of Anglicanism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern English Literature and Religion*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Helen Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 55–68.

⁴³ Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 29. In this regard, see also Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism*, 9–13.

with his famous “Paris is worth a mass,” before putting an end (at least temporarily) to the wars of religion in Europe with the 1598 Edict of Nantes.⁴⁴

It could also be worth mentioning at this point that these same views had been defended in England when Marlowe was still a student in Cambridge by the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno in his heretical *Dialoghi Filosofici* (*Philosophical Dialogues*), which he wrote during his notorious stay between 1583 and 1585, and dedicated to eminent members of the Elizabethan élite such as Philip Sidney or Francis Walsingham.⁴⁵ In those works, also published by John Wolfe, Bruno voiced all his contempt for the inexcusable wars that Christians had been waging for decades in the name of God, and proclaimed the need to substitute Christianity, patently unable to keep Europe at peace, with the natural and civil religion he was advocating in his works, which could instead fulfil the fundamental civilizing function that all good religions should have. Similarly to the Marlowe of the Baines Note, in his *De l’Infinito, universi e mondi*, in particular, Bruno explicitly wrote:

This is why theologians no less learned than religious have never opposed the liberty of philosophers, while the true philosophers of civil worth and good custom have ever fostered religions. For both sides know that *faith is required for the rule of the rude populace who must be governed*, while demonstration is for the contemplative who know how to govern themselves and others (emphasis mine).⁴⁶

Bruno’s likely influence on Marlowe has been investigated in several studies.⁴⁷ Whether or not he had come to know the ideas fiercely defended by the heretic Italian philosopher in his outrageous *Dialoghi*, in any case, what is important to underscore is that Marlowe’s atheistic opinions, as has been discussed above, cannot be merely dismissed as the allegations of untrustworthy government informers, but patently align themselves with age-old, heterodox discourses against Christianity, which circulated widely, more or less secretly, in early modern Europe, and were shared by all those who wanted to put an end to the wars of religion that had been going on for far too long.

⁴⁴ Ragni, “Introduzione,” 122–31.

⁴⁵ On Bruno’s stay in England and the influence of his *Dialoghi* in the English cultural world of the time exists a wide bibliography. Apart from Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 205–90 and Hilary Gatti, *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge: Giordano Bruno in England* (London: Routledge, 1989), see among others also Michele Ciliberto and Nicholas Mann, eds., *Giordano Bruno 1583–1585: The English Experience / L’esperienza inglese. Atti del Convegno. Londra, 3-4 giugno 1994* (Firenze: Leo Olschki Editore, 1997); Diego Pirillo, *Filosofia ed Eresia nell’Inghilterra del Tardo Cinquecento* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2010), and Gilberto Sacerdoti, “Giordano Bruno in England: From London to Rome,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Anglo-Italian Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (London: Routledge, 2019), 192–216.

⁴⁶ Giordano Bruno, “On the Infinite Universe and Worlds,” in *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought*, ed. Dorothea Waley Singer (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1950), 264–5.

⁴⁷ Camerlingo, *Teatro e Teologia*, 49–75.

Furthermore, that those opinions must reveal at least a certain degree of personal involvement on Marlowe's part seems to be confirmed by the fact that the same anti-Christian stance also emerges from his successful dramas. From the *Tamburlaine* plays (1587–8) to *The Jew of Malta* (1589–92) and *The Massacre at Paris* (1592–3),⁴⁸ Marlowe repeatedly hints at the tensions resulting from the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century and raises several doubts on the contradictions of the supposed religion of peace of the Christians.⁴⁹ In this regard, it should also not be forgotten that Marlowe possessed all the theological skills to attack the Scriptures in such detail, having studied Divinity at Cambridge. In the light of this, as Preedy acknowledged, “[t]here is certainly a good case for describing Marlowe [at least] as a religious sceptic. From the myriad contemporary sources identifying Marlowe as a blasphemer to the provocative statements he places in the mouths of his fictional literary speakers, it is easy enough to find supporting biographical and textual evidence for this hypothesis.”⁵⁰

The work in which his anti-Christianity emerges most violently is of course *The Massacre at Paris*. Despite the different scholarly opinions on the play, what cannot be denied is that *Massacre* is a ruthless accusation against that religion (“a word of such a simple sound,” *The Massacre at Paris*, 2.68)⁵¹ which, far from keeping peoples united—as its Latin etymology, “religio,” that is, “to bind,” would imply—was instead being used as an excuse to rekindle the endless power struggles between Catholics and Protestants in late-sixteenth-century Europe. It is none other than the play's villain, the Duke of Guise, that reveals such truth in his long soliloquy in scene 2:

GUISE: [...] My policy hath framed religion.
Religion, *O Diabole!*
Fie, I am ashamed, [...]
To think a word of such a simple sound,
Of so great matter should be made the ground (2.42–69)

Religion, in other words, had nothing to do with those wars that had been devastating France for decades, and that, despite the post-Armada euphoria that had spread in England, were still

⁴⁸ On the far from uncontested chronology of Marlowe's plays see Martin Wiggins, “Marlowe's Chronology and Canon,” in Bartels and Smith, *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, 7–14.

⁴⁹ Gillian Woods, “Marlowe and Religion,” in Bartels and Smith, *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, 222–31. See also Paul Whitfield White, “Marlowe and the Politics of Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 70–89.

⁵⁰ Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism*, 3–4.

⁵¹ All quotations are from Christopher Marlowe, *The Massacre at Paris*, ed. Mathew R. Martin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021) and will appear parenthetically in the text.

perceived as a looming threat by Marlowe and his contemporaries.⁵² In fact, religion was but a “uelamentum falsum” (“a false cover”),⁵³ as Alberico Gentili—Regius Professor at Oxford and the father of modern international law—would explicitly write in his 1598 treatise *De iure belli libri tres*—nothing else than a stratagem to hide entirely earthly, and apparently more important, aims (“so great matter,” 2.69). If Preedy is right when she claims that, building on the widespread (if inevitably caricaturesque) image of the Machiavellian villain, Marlowe’s *Guise* ends up depicting religion “as a tool of secular politics,” and aligning it “with rebellion, fraud and dissimulation.”⁵⁴ I would say that Marlowe goes even further: he shows that, when moved to an entirely secular level, Christianity was utterly useless, since the savageness of the wars of religion proved it was no longer able to carry out its socio-political function.

If the tone of *Massacre*, as has been pointed out, is predominantly anti-Catholic—and it could not have been otherwise in a Protestant country like England, where works for the theatre were subjected to constant censorship—by creating those “textual patterns”⁵⁵ brilliantly identified by Roy Eriksen, which establish undeniable parallels between the atrocities committed by the two religious factions, Marlowe manages to condemn the extremisms of both, so much so that, as Sara Munson Deats has rightly noted, “the good and the bad guys” are often very similar.⁵⁶ When the Protestant Admiral Coligny is murdered and his body thrown from a window, for instance, the *Guise* gleefully contemplates his corpse and exclaims:

Ah, base Chatillon and degenerate,
Chief standard-bearer to the Lutherans,
Thus in despite of thy religion,
The duke of Guise stamps on thy lifeless bulk! (5.38–41)

Not without a good degree of savage irony on Marlowe’s part, the same scene repeats itself towards the end of the play, only the dead body is the *Guise*’s and the one rejoicing at his

⁵² See, among others, Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (London: Methuen Drama, 2004), 3–4, and Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism*, 5–6.

⁵³ Alberico Gentili, *De iure belli libri tres*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 37. In this regard, see also Cristiano Ragni, *Il Teatro e la Nazione: Alberico Gentili, Shakespeare e l’Inghilterra elisabettiana* (Passignano: Aguaplano, 2020).

⁵⁴ Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism*, 14.

⁵⁵ Roy Eriksen, “Construction in Marlowe’s *Massacre at Paris*,” in *Papers from the First Nordic Conference for English Studies*, ed. Stig Johansson and Bjørn Tysdahl (Oslo: Institute for English Studies, 1981), 52.

⁵⁶ Sara Munson Deats, “*Dido, Queen of Carthage* and *The Massacre at Paris*,” in Cheney, *The Cambridge Companion*, 201. In this regard, see also Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism*, 121–59, and Ragni, “Introduzione,” 90–126.

death is Henry III: “Ah, this sweet sight is physic to my soul [...] / Surcharged with guilt of thousand massacres, / Monsieur of Lorraine, sink away to hell!” (23.41–44).

Fragmented though it can be, examples such as these show that *The Massacre at Paris* is neither incoherent nor lacking in dramatic unity, as has been often claimed.⁵⁷ In fact, internal echoes and repetitions serve not only what Leah Marcus has called “the demands of theatrical intensity and savage irony,”⁵⁸ but, most of all, Marlowe’s “unsentimental critique,” as Mathew R. Martin has recently put it, “of religiously inspired violence”⁵⁹ on both sides of the religious divide. “What irreligious pagan’s parts be these?” (24.73), a dismayed Henry III asks in the last scene of the play, after being stabbed in his turn by a Catholic friar—his question could be taken as an apt comment on the whole series of ruthless events that Marlowe brings onstage in this work. If Christianity had kept Europe united for more than 1,200 years, Marlowe seems to claim in *Massacre*, the wars of religion that were tearing France apart and threatening England were patently demonstrating that it was no longer capable of doing so.

Small wonder, then, that one such as Marlowe, who witnessed the carnage produced by the wars of religions from within and who must have had the pitiful tales of the Canterbury-based Huguenot survivors of the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre still in his ears should come to think it was high time to denounce Christianity as not only brutal and contradictory but, ultimately, useless. This is something that Marlowe does also in *The Jew of Malta*. The criticism of Christianity that emerges from this work is just as radical and savagely ironic as in *The Massacre at Paris*. Marlowe’s critique is voiced through Barabas’s extraordinary wit, which again spares neither Catholics nor Protestants.⁶⁰ As soon as he enters the stage, the first thing that Barabas does is subtly turn Jesus’s own words—“Euery tree that bringeth not forth good fruite, is hewen downe, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 7:19)⁶¹—against all Christians: “I can see no fruits in all their faith, / but malice, falsehood, and excessive pride, / which methinks fits not their profession” (*The Jew of Malta*, 1.1.114–16).⁶² Not only were Christians proving incapable of keeping peace, in other words, but they were also proving to behave much unlike the Scriptural precepts.

⁵⁷ Martin, “Introduction,” in Marlowe, *The Massacre at Paris*, 15–16.

⁵⁸ Leah S. Marcus, “*The Massacre at Paris*,” in Deats and Logan, *Christopher Marlowe at 450*, 153.

⁵⁹ Martin, “Introduction,” 2.

⁶⁰ See G.K. Hunter, “The Theology of Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 27 (1964): 211–40; and Camerlingo, *Teatro e Teologia*, 143–77.

⁶¹ *Geneva Bible 1560*, electronic edn., Mark Langley: <https://studybible.info/version/Geneva> (last accessed, 16 February 2023).

⁶² All quotations are from Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, ed. William H. Sherman and Chloe Preedy (London: Bloomsbury, 2021) and will appear parenthetically in the text.

Soon afterwards, it is Catholicism, and more specifically the Catholic clergy, that falls under Barabas's derisory fire, as he describes friars' and nuns' charity with words that let the audience understand the bawdy lasciviousness in which they actually indulge:

BARABAS: And yet I know the prayers of those nuns
And holy friars, having money for their pains,
Are wondrous;—[*Aside*] and indeed do no man good;—
And, seeing they are not idle, but still doing,
'Tis likely they in time may reap some fruit,
I mean, in fullness of perfection (2.3.80–86)

“Sexual encounters,” Rosanna Camerlingo commented, “are subtly presented here as the only “pious works” in which both friars and nuns are engaged; by obeying the Biblical dictate, the only thing that they manage to gain is their biological multiplication.”⁶³ If this is the derisive and blasphemous portrait that Marlowe makes of Catholic doctrine and practice, it inevitably follows that those who are part of or believe in it must be ridiculously “credulous”: “Becomes it Jews to be so credulous?” (1.2.358), Barabas scornfully asks, when his daughter Abigail leaves him to enter (although still under false pretences) the Catholic sisterhood.

Besides revealing the faults he finds in Catholicism, Barabas also criticizes a practice that, as Baines would report in his Note, Marlowe found especially widespread among those Protestants, whom he reportedly considered “HypoCritically asses,” and that Julian the Apostate had condemned in his works. While explaining to Abigail how to dissemble her faith properly so as to be accepted in the Catholic convent, Barabas reveals: “A counterfeit profession is better / than unseen hypocrisy” (1.2.292–93). Outright lying, in other words, is better than being hypocrite. Obviously, Marlowe alludes here to the widespread practice of Nicodemism—that is, what allowed the forementioned “libertins” to cloak their true beliefs and conform to official religious dictates. While Barabas's words unveil English anxieties regarding issues of false conversion and religious persecution,⁶⁴ they also allow Marlowe explicitly to tell his audience that it was better to dissimulate a religious belief than hypocritically think that truth had anything to do with religion. This was the hypocrisy that he saw in Protestants—as Baines would later report—who did not acknowledge that the stories told in the Scriptures were allegories, and (dangerously) stuck to the letter of those texts. Witty and incredulous, Barabas can be thus said to be the embodiment of rational, “libertine” intelligence. However, differently from the “libertins” who knew that it was safer to conceal this truth, Barabas patently revealed it to the audience that crowded the Elizabethan theatres,

⁶³ Camerlingo, *Teatro e Teologia*, 163 (trans. mine).

⁶⁴ In this regard, see Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism*, 62–91.

just like Marlowe himself would do with those he thought were his friends, as the 1593 documents reported. Small wonder, again, that both Barabas's and Marlowe's mouths ended up being silenced.

Marlowe must have developed this dissatisfaction with Christianity relatively early. In fact, it can be found already in the *Tamburlaine* plays, his first theatrical success.⁶⁵ In these two works, a far-from-cautious Marlowe indeed makes deft use of Tamburlaine's shocking enterprises, and actually proposes an alternative to the warmongering Christian religion, hidden under the "furious vociferation"⁶⁶ and the overwhelming adventures of the eponymous hero. This alternative is not "truer" than the religion of the Christians, but only more spectacular, and just as outrageous as the "monstruous" opinions later echoed by the 1593 documents. In the plays, Tamburlaine is presented, as has been frequently remarked, as a walking threat to the established political and religious order—a "sturdy Scythian thief," who shows neither piety nor mercy and, in his exceptionally successful conquest of the world, "with his lawless train / Daily commits incivil outrages," while at the same time mocking his enemies' hierarchies and their useless laws of war (*1 Tamburlaine*, 1.1.36–43).⁶⁷ What I argue is that it is precisely the war that Tamburlaine declares on what he constantly defines as the "old" world that ends up embodying all those ceremonial features that a religion capable of "keep[ing] men in awe" was supposed to have.⁶⁸ Suffice it to remember here how Tamburlaine describes one of his camps:

[...] our vermilion tents,
Which threatened more than if the region
Next underneath the element of fire
Were full of comets and of blazing stars
Whose flaming trains should reach down to the earth. (*2 Tamburlaine*, 5.1.86–90)

Parodying, as has been noted, the rites and language of both Catholic and Reformed Christianity,⁶⁹ Tamburlaine's war stands out as a rite that allows him to gather more and more

⁶⁵ See David McInnis, "Introduction," in *Tamburlaine the Great: A Critical Reader*, ed. David McInnis (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 1–18.

⁶⁶ Ian Donaldson (ed.), *Ben Jonson*, The Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 792.

⁶⁷ All references to the two *Tamburlaine* plays are from Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey (London: Penguin, 2003) and will appear parenthetically in the text. In this regard, see Irving Ribner, "The Idea of History in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*," *ELH* 20, no. 4 (1953): 251–66; Roger E. Moore, "The Spirit and the Letter: Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and Elizabethan Religious Radicalism," *Studies in Philology* 99 (2002): 123–51, and Mark Thornton Burnett, "*Tamburlaine the Great, Parts One and Two*," in Cheney, *The Cambridge Companion*, 127–43.

⁶⁸ See Cristiano Ragni, "'Till heaven dissolvèd be': Atheism and Apocalypse in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*," in *Sicut Lilium inter Spinis. Literature and Religion in the Renaissance*, ed. Camilla Caporicci (München: Utz Verlag, 2018), 83–114.

⁶⁹ See R.B. Reed, "Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*: Its Topicality and its Tone," *Cithara: Essays in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* 17, no. 2 (1978): 20–39; Camerlingo, *Teatro e Teologia*, 77–110, and Franco

lands and riches and, also thanks to his persuasive rhetorical skills, convince most of his enemies to pass to his side, thus uniting different peoples into one seemingly unstoppable army: “Forsake thy king and do but join with me,” he says to Theridamas, commander of the King of Persia’s militia, “and we will triumph over the world” (*I Tamburlaine*, 1.2.172–73). “Won with thy words and conquered with thy looks,” Theridamas immediately replies, “I yield myself, my men, and horse to thee, / To be partaker of thy good or ill / As long as life maintains Theridamas” (1.2.228–31). Even though Tamburlaine’s accomplishments, as Andrew Duxfield has shown, are eventually undercut,⁷⁰ the war against the world that he carries out for most of the two parts appears to be very similar to one of those “Ceremonies” that in the Baines Note Marlowe would be reported to praise. An outrageous “ceremony” that, contrarily to Christianity or Islam, succeeds—at least for some time—in uniting people, while Tamburlaine’s enemies (unsuccessfully) invoke their respective gods to try and resist him.

In conclusion, considering the rich set of long-standing anti-Christian debates and early modern concerns discussed in these pages, I argue, contributes to our better understanding of Marlowe’s “monstrous” opinions on the Scriptures, as reported in the documents which circulated in the days immediately before his death. Even if those documents may have been somehow concocted for political purposes, they delineate a coherent group of “atheistic” views that echo an undercurrent of unorthodox belief that had been crossing European culture for centuries. What’s more, these same views, as has been shown, can also be found—quite openly—in Marlowe’s plays, which again seems to point to the fact that there is likely to be some truth in them.

There may be several possible reasons for Marlowe to have come to embrace such “subversive” opinions on the Scriptures: among others, the “wide range of classical ‘atheist’ writings”⁷¹ he was exposed to in the course of his life as a student in Canterbury and Cambridge, and “his exposure to the spiritual anxieties suffered and the battles of belief fought by the men and women of sixteenth-century London, England, and Europe.”⁷² Not to mention, I would add, his witnessing from within—given his likely involvement in the Elizabethan intelligence service—the atrocities perpetuated by the European wars of religion,

Marenco, “Il fondamentalismo capovolto di Christopher Marlowe,” in *Le Scritture e le riscritture: discorso religioso e discorso letterario in Europa nella prima età moderna*, ed. Daniele Borgogni and Rosanna Camerlingo (Naples: Liguori, 2005), 81–102.

⁷⁰ See Andrew Duxfield, *Christopher Marlowe and the Failure to Unify* (London: Routledge, 2016), 40–66.

⁷¹ Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism*, 7. See also Riggs, *The World*, 37–41.

⁷² Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism*, 18.

which had turned the interpretation of those Scriptures into a weapon of mass destruction. What I think it is important to highlight is that at the origins of Marlowe's atheism, as it emerges both from the 1593 documents and plays such as *Tamburlaine the Great*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *The Massacre at Paris*, there seem to lie something more serious than the vague subversiveness usually mentioned, or the unreliable allegations of shady government informers. In the light of what has been discussed above, Marlowe's atheism stands out as an articulate system of thought, based on a political conception of religion that was not only rooted in the early philosophical opposition to Christianity, but also found a substantial following in the highest spheres of early modern English and European politics at large. If then Marlowe's approach to the Scriptures can be defined "subversive," it is not because it somehow challenged the religious and political authority of Elizabethan England, but because, unlike the opinions of philosophers, statesmen, and sovereigns, and even the charges of shady spies, it was brought onstage in his highly acclaimed plays, and thus communicated to many a message intended instead for the few: that religion had nothing to do with truth and that it was simply to be used as an element of social cohesion, "only to keep men in awe."

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