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**Marlowe's Radical Reformation: Christopher Marlowe and
the Radical Christianity of the Polish Brethren**

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Although scholars of both literature and history have made arguments for Christopher Marlowe's religious belief in Catholicism, the Church of England, and even atheism (which could have been conflated with both by different parties during his lifetime), few consider the belief system of the Polish Brethren, a precursor to Unitarianism established by one Faustus Socinus. This essay uses historical and social network analyses to suggest a close tie between Marlowe's acquaintances and believers in Socinianism. Clues in Doctor Faustus and Massacre at Paris suggest Marlowe's skepticism concerning the doctrines of Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. Furthermore, repeated references to Poland and the beliefs of the Socinians suggest Marlowe's familiarity with the doctrine of the Polish Brethren. Finally, the complex ties between the Elizabethan Secret Service—of which Marlowe was a member—and the early modern royal courts across Europe provide evidence that the Reformation in England was shaped by far more complex—and even modern—ideas of religious diversity than we typically credit. For Marlowe, these influences produced a deep-seated resentment of organized religion and its impact on the anti-Catholic policies of the Elizabethan government during the 1580s and early 1590s.

Anti-Catholicism formed a significant part of the Elizabethan government's religious policy in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and frequently appeared in sermons, pamphlets, and plays throughout the 1580s and 1590s. Christopher Marlowe's drama—especially *Doctor Faustus* and *Massacre at Paris*—participates in this anti-Catholic tradition, but also introduces his audience to a perspective which is a good deal more unorthodox. In his plays, Marlowe injects the influence of an obscure form of Protestantism which arose in Poland in the 1560s and which encouraged the radical and dangerous idea that politics and religion should be kept separate. When viewed through the context of Marlowe's life, death, and work—both on and off the stage—it is clear that, whether or not Marlowe personally subscribed to this doctrine, it certainly influenced his writing and thought; by the end of his life, Marlowe's drama openly condemned the religiously-motivated violence being perpetuated by the Elizabethan government.

On May 18, 1593 the Privy Council issued an arrest warrant for Marlowe on the charge of atheism. Although Marlowe was immediately released when he presented himself two days later, ten days after that, the young playwright was dead, stabbed near the eye by Ingram Frizer in a supposed argument over the “reckoning.” A search of the apartments he shared with Thomas Kyd yielded an “atheistic tract” which Kyd identified as belonging to Marlowe. The tract was Arian, an anti-Trinitarian sect which drew a distinction between Christ as the Son of God and God, and avowed that Christ was subordinate to God (unlike traditional Protestantism and Catholicism, in which Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit were considered a unified trinity). These papers were “copied from John Proctor’s book, *The Fall of the Late Arrian*, published in 1549, the year in which Archbishop Cranmer had examined John Assheton, who forthwith recanted.”¹ What is noteworthy about these papers is not simply that Kyd avowed them to be Marlowe’s, but that “Marlowe possessed or copied the heresies,” notes Kenneth Muir, “but not Proctor’s painstaking refutations.”² Muir concludes that Marlowe must therefore have “shared the views of Assheton, who had sought to demonstrate that Jesus was not divine;” A.D. Wraight posits that “Presumably Marlowe would have used the treatise as a basis for serious discussion, point by point, with the members of Raleigh’s circle.”³

Nine days after Marlowe’s death, the Privy Council released a transcript of the so-called “Baines Note,” a documentation of the testimony of Richard Baines against Marlowe listing many of Marlowe’s supposed heretical beliefs, including the infamous statement “that Moyses was but a Jugler & that one Heriots being Sir W Raleighs man Can do more then he” and “That Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest”:⁴

1 Muir, 120.

2 Buckley, 123; Muir, 120.

3 Muir, 120; Wraight, 262.

4 Qtd. in Kendall, 332.

That the beginning of religion was only to keep men in awe.

...

That if there be any God or good religion, then it is in the Papists, because the service of God is performed with more ceremonies, as elevation of the mass, organs, singing men, shaven crowns, etc. That all Protestants are hypocritical asses.

...

That Saint John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ and leaned always in his bosom; that he used him as the sinners of Sodoma.

...

That the angel Gabriel was bawd to the Holy Ghost, because he brought the salutation to Mary.⁵

Certainly—as many scholars have remarked over the years—the reliability of Baines’s account is somewhat suspect, but there are reasons to believe that the Note, even if exaggerated, might reflect the unorthodox nature of Marlowe’s beliefs.⁶

In addition to the testimony of Baines, we have the assertion of one Richard Cholmley, who

saith and verily believeth that one Marlowe is able to show more sound reasons for atheism than any divine in England is able to give to prove divinity, and that Marlowe told him that he hath read The Atheist lecture to Sir Walter Raleigh and others.⁷

Another of Marlowe’s (more friendly) acquaintances and fellow-playwright George Greene pleaded with Marlowe in his deathbed treatise *Greene’s Groatsworth of Wit bought with a Million of Repentance* in 1592, warning him to repent:

Wonder not, (for with thee wil I first begin) thou famous gracer of Tragedians, that *Greene*, who hath said with thee (like the foole in his heart there is no God, should now give glorie unto his greatness: for penetrating is his power, his hand lyes heavie upon me, hee hath spoken unto me with a voice of thunder, and I have felt he is a God that can punish enemies. Why should thy excellent wit, his gift, bee so blind, that thou shouldst give no glorie to the giver?⁸

5 Qtd. in Kendall, 332.

6 Muir, 118.

7 Muir, 119.

8 Qtd. in Muir, 123.

Greene even appears to borrow some of his imagery from *Doctor Faustus*: of God's heavy hand from its conclusion, in which Marlowe writes "hide me from the heavy wrath of God!" (*DF* 5.2.85) and the image of God's voice like thunder from Marlowe's line "Fearful echoes thunder in mine ears" (*DF* 2.3.20).⁹

In addition, after Marlowe's death, Thomas Beard, in his 1597 *Theatre of Gods Judgements*, condemns Marlowe—and only Marlowe—by name, writing,

Not inferior to any of the former in Atheisme and impiety, and equal to al in maner of punishment, was one of our own nation, of fresh and late memorie, called Marlin, by profession a scholler, brought vp from his youth in the Vniuersitie of Cambridge, but by practice a Play-maker.¹⁰

Taken all together, we must recognize that Marlowe's beliefs must have been unconventional at the very least, and were likely heretical, although I share Buckley's conclusion that "we have no choice but to conclude that [Marlowe] did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ."¹¹

Taking Marlowe's plays into consideration reveals—in *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*—at least some cursory knowledge of Islam and Judaism, as well as disdain for the hypocrisy of both Catholics and traditional Protestants. *Doctor Faustus*, in particular, is often viewed by scholars as an indicator of Marlowe's religious orientation, yet none of the aforementioned religions provide an adequate framework for the metaphysical problems facing Faustus throughout the play.

Prior scholarly arguments typically attempt to reconcile the play's most problematic moments as Calvinist, Lutheran, or Catholic, but are always unable to fully do so. C.L. Barber argues that *Doctor*

9 Text of *Doctor Faustus* quoted throughout: Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are taken from the A-text. It is worth noting that the B-text revisions do not significantly impact this thesis; if anything, later revisions reinforce my argument (as will be seen in the section on references to Poland).

10 Qtd. in Buckley, 90-91.

11 Buckley, 136.

Faustus “dramatizes blasphemy as heroic endeavor...a fable of modern man seeking to break out of religious limitations” following the model of Martin Luther.¹² Although Barber perhaps exaggerates the level of *Faustus*’s heroism, particularly given both his tragic ending and his reduction to farce throughout the play, the central focus of *Doctor Faustus* is a struggle against religious dogmatism.

David Bevington notes that the play presents a dichotomy between “Marlowe’s fascination with Lutheran-Calvinist determinism and with Italian humanism.”¹³ This struggle appears early in the play, as *Faustus* debates his course of study:

FAUSTUS Settle thy studies, *Faustus*, and begin
To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess.
...
Bene disserere est finis logices.
Is to dispute well logic’s chiefest end?
Affords this art no greater miracle?
Then read no more, thou hast attained the end.
A greater subject fitteth *Faustus*’ wit.
Bid *On kai me on* farewell. (1.1.1-2, 7-12)

Bevington notes that “*Faustus*’s supposedly Aristotelian definition of logic...turns out to be from Ramus, and *On kai me on* (line 12) is from the skeptic sophist Gorgias.”¹⁴ Furthermore, “*Faustus* willfully misinterprets Ramus’s idea that disputing well is ‘logic’s chiefest end’ (I.i.8) to mean that disputation should be an end in itself rather than a means to salvation.”¹⁵ When juxtaposed against Marlowe’s depiction of Ramus’s death in *Massacre at Paris* (about which more will be said later), this speech suggests that *Faustus* fails to understand the importance of intellectual inquiry—his desire is for power rather than knowledge.

This humanist influence clashes almost immediately with *Faustus*’s turn away from philosophy, medicine, and law to divinity:

12 Barber, 246.

13 Bevington, “Marlowe and God,” 289.

14 Bevington, “Marlowe and God,” 291.

15 Bevington and Rasmussen, “Introduction,” in *Doctor Faustus*, 39.

FAUSTUS When all is done, divinity is best.
Jerome's Bible, Faustus, view it well.
[He reads.] *Stipendium peccati mors est*. Ha!
Stipendium, etc.
The reward of sin is death. That's hard.
[He reads.] *Si peccasse negamus, fallimur*
Et nulla est in nobis veritas.
If we say that we have no sin,
We deceive ourselves, and there's no truth in us.
Why then belike we must sin,
And so consequently die.
Ay, we must die an everlasting death. (*DF* 1.1.37-48)

Here, we see Faustus engaging in what Luciano García García describes as the inherently Protestant introduction of dogmatic possibilities, “opening the door to the risks of interpretation.”¹⁶ In *Doctor Faustus*, interpretive failure leads Faustus first down the path toward conjuration and necromancy, and, eventually, toward damnation.

Yet before we reach that juncture in the play, Faustus must first choose to pursue the art of conjuration and enter into a necromantic pact with the devil-qua-Mephistopheles. Faustus takes this course of action because, he explains,

FAUSTUS Emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.
A sound magician is a mighty god. (*DF* 1.1.59-64)

Faustus's argument for conjuration and necromancy is not religious or spiritual in nature; rather, he is interested in the political power he can gain by means of magic.

In Marlowe's world, power—whether secular or spiritual—was frequently aligned with oppression and violence. Faustus's crime in *Doctor Faustus* is thus not religious heresy, but the wish to rule over emperors, kings, and even the weather; his bargain with Mephistopheles condemned because it is Machiavellian rather than heretical. Although Marlowe himself was accused—by Greene—of being both, what we see in Marlowe's plays suggests that while

16 García García, 102.

he was keenly aware of the short-term success of Machiavellian tactics (Faustus in *Doctor Faustus*, the Guise in *Massacre at Paris*, Mortimer in *Edward II*, Barabas in *Jew of Malta*), ultimately his Machiavellian characters suffer the loss of both power and life (usually at the same time). In the case of Faustus, the formula is the same: Faustus seeks power for its own sake, exploits that power unwisely, and is destroyed by his own inability to manage that same power.

Once Faustus has made the determination to conjure a devil, the play passes from academic to practical arguments against his choice, although, it is worth noting, not from any belief of Marlowe's in the dangers of witchcraft. As Jay Zysk suggests, "the conjuror's circle and spells pronounced over it can be seen as parodies of sacramental rituals if not wholesale rejection of God himself," although I would suggest it is dogma rather than deity which Marlowe here rejects.¹⁷ Certainly, Marlowe's willingness to explicitly stage a conjuration suggests his skepticism of its efficacy; someone who believed in the power of witchcraft ritual to summon a demon would hardly dare to do so merely for the sake of a play.

Upon his arrival (and subsequent change of costume), Mephistopheles is interrogated by Faustus about the power of the conjuration. One of the interesting ramifications of Mephistopheles's claim that Faustus's conjuring was "the cause, but yet *per accidens*" (*DF* 1.3.47) of his appearance is that "There is no magic *per se*, at least none over which Faustus has any real power. The words he speaks have no special power to conjure the devil, except that by blaspheming he literally damns himself."¹⁸ In essence, Faustus's magic is not magic at all—and the powers he is granted by Mephistopheles come from the demon—suggesting Marlowe's deep-seated skepticism of the supernatural. Suzan Last instead proposes that Marlowe seeks "to question its doctrinal representations and the ideal of conventionally-

¹⁷ Zysk, 349.

¹⁸ Last, 33.

conceived human interaction with it,” but I would argue that Marlowe is far more likely representing a skeptical picture of both witchcraft and miracles, instead focusing on the petty cruelty of the very human people behind the tricks in this play, like those engaged in war, murder, and other violence in *Massacre at Paris*, *Tamburlaine*, and *The Jew of Malta*.¹⁹

As the play continues, Marlowe moves from the frame of philosophical discussions of religious belief, disbelief, and doctrine to a more humorous attack on Catholicism. During the encounter between Faustus, Mephistopheles, and the Papal court in act three, Faustus steals dishes and beverages from the Pope, mocking him as he does so, and drives the party from the room after boxing the Pope on the ear (*DF* 3.1.80.2). When they return, a collection of friars sing a ridiculous dirge of exorcism:

FRIARS Cursèd be he that stole away his Holiness' meat from the table.

Maledicat Dominus!

Cursèd be he that struck his Holiness a blow on the face.

Maledicat Dominus!

Cursèd be he that took Friar Sandelo a blow on the pate.

Maledicat Dominus!

Cursèd be he that disturbeth our holy dirge.

Maledicat Dominus!

Cursèd be he that took away his Holiness' wine.

Maledicat Dominus!

Et omnes sancti. Amen. (DF 3.1.89-100)

The scene ends rather dramatically as Faustus and Mephistopheles “beat the FRIARS, and fling fireworks among them, and so exeunt” (*DF* 3.1.100.1-2). In addition to mocking the ritual of exorcism and Catholic prayer in general, the utter failure of the dirge to dispatch either Faustus or the demon from the room suggests Marlowe’s dismissive—albeit orthodox—attitude toward Catholicism.

As Judith Weil observes, Marlowe’s farcical representation of Catholic praxis and clergy serve to permit his subsequent, and more oblique, condemnation of Protestantism.²⁰ The ending of the play,

¹⁹ Last, 33.

²⁰ Weil, 69-70.

in particular, raises the question of predestination versus free will, pitting the doctrine of Calvinism against the free will of Lutheranism. Critics of the play have historically argued over whether Faustus is ultimately damned because he was always so (predestination), or because he chooses to be so (free will). Critical arguments situate the moment of damnation across the play, ranging from the signing of the contract, to the kiss with Helen, to the final moment of damnation itself, with T.W. Craik arguing that there is in fact no moment “at which Faustus is irrevocably damned; the struggle for damnation or salvation runs throughout the play.”²¹

The argument for Calvinist predestination in *Doctor Faustus* focuses on the idea that Faustus fails to repent because, as Faustus himself argues, “Faustus’ offence can ne’er be pardoned. The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus...nothing can rescue me” (*DF* 5.2.15-16, 59). Faustus’s insistence that he cannot be saved—particularly, that even the serpent who caused Original Sin can be saved but he cannot—comes from the Calvinist doctrinal argument that “God hardens the hearts of those whom he rejects,” making them unable to repent:

As Faustus sees it, this difficult issue leads in Calvinist theology to a non-answer: we must accept God’s unfathomable will. Because grace is God’s gift, he may give it or withhold it as he wills in perfect justice. Faustus embodies all the characteristic failings of the reprobate; his deeds are manifest signs of his ungodliness, and they deserve the punishment they receive.²²

According to Calvinism, Faustus’s actions throughout the play are predetermined by God (as is the fate of the character Faustus by Marlowe), and, thus, he is always already damned, and his decision to conjure Mephistopheles and sign a pact with the devil are the consequences rather than the determinants of that fate.

However, García García, among others, argues that despite the play’s determinism, Faustus’s damnation cannot be Calvinistically

21 Bevington, “Marlowe and God,” 297; Craik, 189-196.

22 Bevington, “Marlowe and God,” 310.

predetermined “unless we suppose that the Good Angel is vicious enough to torment the poor reprobate for what he had never the chance to get.”²³ Instead, according to García García, the deterministic language which appears in the play belongs almost entirely to the “Evil Angel, Mephostophilis, and Lucifer’s discourses,” which suggests that Calvinist doctrine feeds into Faustus’s despair and is the tactic by which evil convinces Faustus that he has no free will.²⁴ Thus, in *Doctor Faustus*, any attempt at arguing for predestination or early damnation runs up against the problem of dramatic failure; as Bevington and Eric Rasmussen argue, “to award Faustus irrecoverably to the devil at some earlier point” other than the ending “satisfies Calvinist theology at the expense of dramatic tension and uncertainty.”²⁵ If Faustus’s fate were determined from the beginning, there would be no specific dramatic tension produced by the question of his damnation or salvation. If there were no choice to be made, there would be no tragedy, yet the play’s end also refuses to align with the Lutheran doctrine of salvation through faith.

In his final speech, Faustus oscillates between his desire to repent and his fear of the power of hell, his language switching between the discourse offered by the Old Man and that threatened by Lucifer. First, he calls upon God and Christ:

FAUSTUS The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned.
O, I’ll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?
See, see where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!
Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!
Yet will I call on him. (*DF* 5.2.76-81)

Yet Faustus’s cry of faith is inadequate, as God or Christ (or both) does not (or cannot) save him. Faustus therefore turns back to Lucifer:

23 García García, 101.

24 García García, 101.

25 Bevington and Rasmussen, 20.

FAUSTUS O, spare me, Lucifer!
Where is it now? 'Tis gone; and see where God
Stretcheth out his arm and bends his ireful brows!
Mountains and hills, come, come and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!
No, no!
Then will I headlong run into the earth.
Earth, gape! O, no, it will not harbour me.

...
My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Enter [LUCIFER, MEPHISOTPHELES, and other] Devils.
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!
Ugly hell, gape not. Come not, Lucifer!
I'll burn my books. Ah, Mephistopheles!
[The Devils] exeunt with him. (DF 5.2.81-88, 120-123.1)

What matters in *Doctor Faustus* is not that the audience determines whether Faustus's damnation came from God or from his own free will, but the fact that both theological options are insufficient. As G.M. Pinciss suggests, both are equally plausible: "His inability to give up the pursuit of magic or break his agreement with Lucifer, then, can explain, according to anti-Calvinist teaching, why he is ultimately damned or, according to Calvinist teaching, why he was born damned."²⁶ Last claims that "This neat division [between critical interpretations] is, perhaps, statistical proof supporting the idea that the play is basically constructed of contradictory impulses, each simultaneously reifying and undermining an orthodox worldview."²⁷ If Faustus's will—the Lutheran interpretation—we run up against the problem of the failure of Christ's blood to redeem Faustus, despite his calling upon Christ for salvation (the faith which Lutheran doctrine argues is sufficient for redemption). Critical dismissals of Faustus's turn to Lucifer in the subsequent line as the reason for his damnation skip over his initial summons of God and Christ, leading to the more common critical argument for a deterministic, Calvinist theology.

Yet in arguing for interpretations of either Calvinist or Lutheran theological constructs, most critics, King-Kok Cheung argues, "ignore a third, existential, view which is beyond religion and

26 Pinciss, 257.

27 Last, 27-28.

blasphemy.”²⁸ This “third” viewpoint seems to be vaguely deistic in Cheung’s terms, but I suggest that it may be found in a somewhat obscure anti-Trinitarian sect which rejects both predestination and the divinity of Christ espoused by Catholics and most Protestant denominations (including Calvinists and Lutherans).²⁹

Founded in 1563 in Poland, the Polish Brethren were also known as Socinians, after their most notorious member, Faustus Socinus. First, and most obvious, is the coincidence of names: Marlowe’s play is modelled on the story of Johan Faust, but he calls it *Doctor Faustus*, perhaps in acknowledgment of the prominent Socinian of the same name . . . although this could be nothing more than happenstance.

I am more convinced by the way in which Socinian doctrine resolves the stickiest theological problems in the play. Socinus’s most influential works, *De auctoritate scripturae sacrae* (1570) and *De Jesu Christo servatore* (1578), lay out the essence of his theology, which combined rational humanism with Reformation focus on Biblical exegesis.³⁰ The three central tenets of Socinianism deny the trinity, describe Christ as “mortal . . . one whose office was by precept and example to point the way that leads to eternal life,” and reject the doctrine of predestination.³¹ Politically, Socinus “stood for the separation of Church and State and declared himself against the civil punishment of heretics by exile, prison, or execution.”³² These tenets, although not stated explicitly in *Doctor Faustus*, help explain some of the theological paradoxes in the play.

For instance, Mephistopheles’s description of hell is, Last explains, of “a state of mind, not the physical place of literal fire and torment that held popular imagination for so long,” a description which is strongly suggestive of a skeptical worldview which dismisses the reality of hellfire encouraged by the doctrines of Catholicism and

28 Cheung, 193.

29 Cheung, 194.

30 McLachlan, 11-12.

31 McLachlan, 13.

32 McLachlan, 15.

Calvinism.³³ Instead of a place of eternal torment, Socinian doctrine taught that those unworthy of heaven were instead annihilated, given eternal death rather than an eternity of torment. Such a description more closely aligns with Mephistopheles's description of hell as an absence from God rather than a physical place: "Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it" (*DF* 1.3.78), as well as Faustus's claim that "I think hell's a fable" (*DF* 2.1.130) and his earlier assertion that "we must die an everlasting death" (*DF* 1.1.48).

The play's uncertain conclusion also makes more sense when viewed through a Socinian lens. As H. John McLachlan explains, perhaps the most central tenet of Socinianism was its doctrine on repentance:

the condition of God's forgiveness of sins was not punishment but repentance...Together with this attack upon the doctrine of vicarious atonement went Socinus's rejection of predestination and his assertion of free will...it was only a step to the repudiation of the doctrine of original sin...he promulgated a new conception of the Christian religion as primarily the saving knowledge of God, mediated through Christ, which gives to men eternal life.³⁴

In short, Christ was an example of how to achieve salvation, not the source of salvation, and even, as Faustus remarks, the serpent—a repudiation of original sin that is also quite Socinian—can be forgiven.

Furthermore, the lack of Christological centrality throughout much of the play suggests Christ's relative lack of importance. Bevington remarks that at the play's end, "We are left nonetheless with the perception that God (Christ) is starkly absent from the play."³⁵ Interestingly, we find accordance with Socinian doctrine in the inability of Faustus to be saved by the streaming of Christ's blood in the firmament, because, according to Socinus, Christ's blood is not divine. What we—and Marlowe's audience—are left with, then,

³³ Last, 34.

³⁴ McLachlan, 14-15.

³⁵ Bevington, "Marlowe and God," 311.

at the play's end, is a mingled sense of uncertainty and finality; although, as the Chorus tells us, "Faustus is gone" (Epilogue.4), the play itself provides few clear theological answers, complicating instead of clarifying the predominant doctrinal debates of the day. Instead, Marlowe presents a conundrum in which none of the dominant English religions provide an adequate doctrinal answer to Faustus's situation, cloaking his heresy in the an ostensibly orthodox ending in which Faustus must be damned.³⁶

Despite these clues, we nevertheless need to know whether or not Marlowe could have even known about the beliefs and doctrines of the Polish Brethren before this hypothesis can be considered plausible. The search for an answer takes us out of England and into Eastern Europe and the reign of the Polish Emperor Sigismund II, a ruler known, in particular, for his toleration of unorthodox religious dogma.

Socinianism, established in Kolosvar, Transylvania—a province of the Polish Empire—in 1563, eventually became quite popular in England in the years leading up to the Civil War. Dmitry Cizevsky explains that English Socinianism grew in influence from the mid-sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, so much so that the Socinians in Krakow dedicated their *Racovian Catechism* to King James I in 1606, and it was addressed by thinkers such as John Locke, John Milton, and Isaac Newton.³⁷ At this historical point, explains Stanislas Kot, "The Raków prints, though everywhere banned, were in demand and were snapped up, especially in Germany, France, Holland, and England."³⁸ By the time the theaters closed in 1642, observes Nigel Smith, "Anti-Trinitarianism was more pervasive and spread more diversely in Europe and in England than any other single orthodox view."³⁹ But was it present and known in England by 1589, when Marlowe composed *Doctor Faustus*?

36 Bevington and Rasmussen, 23; Kocher, 104

37 Cizevsky, 486.

38 Kot, 218.

39 Smith, 160.

Certainly, the presence of the “atheistic” tract in Marlowe’s apartments suggests that Marlowe would have been sympathetic to Socinian teachings. In addition, according to McLachlan, one of Socinus’s disciples, Simon Budny, was brought to England in 1574 by a merchant named Ralph Rutter and introduced to John Foxe (of martyrological fame). Rutter worked for the Muscovy Company, a Anglo-Russian trading outfit partially bankrolled and managed by the Elizabethan spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham.⁴⁰

Further research into Rutter reveals his name appearing in letters between Queen Elizabeth I and the Russian Czar Ivan the Terrible, also written in 1574. In these letters, Ivan makes reference to “the business of Thomas Glover and Ralph Rutter and their confederates,” men who came to Russia as merchants, but “who did not trade according to our privileges.”⁴¹ In response to Elizabeth’s inquiries after their health and safety, the Czar replies that

those your subjects for their evil practices and spying have come to deserve even death; but we, being a Christian prince and not wishing to see the blood of such wretches, and did not order them to be put to death. As regards Ralph (Rutter) and Thomas (Glover) we sent them to you before this and you ought not to write to us any more about them.⁴²

What is particularly interesting about this for our purposes is that as a spy, Rutter may well have been known to Marlowe—at the very least, they would have had mutual acquaintances in the Elizabethan Secret Service—a connection which provides us with a possible link between Marlowe and Socinian doctrine.

In addition—for the above is, after all, circumstantial at best—Marlowe was at Cambridge with a known Socinian named Francis Kett who was executed for heresy in Norwich on January 14, 1589, just before *Doctor Faustus* was produced. His beliefs, explains Muir, matched those of Socinus:

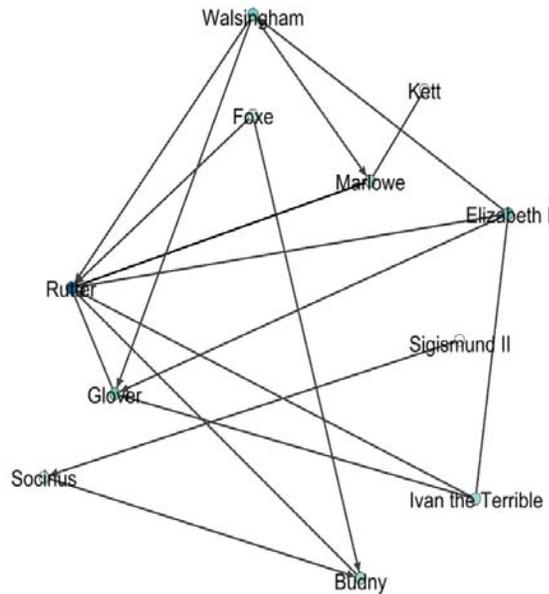
40 McLachlan, 25

41 *Transactions*, 96.

42 *Transactions*, 99.

Kett claimed that there was no church in England, ‘neither have the ministers any power or authority to excommunicate, to bind or loose’. He argued from the parable of the Tares that ‘no man ought to be put to death for heresies, but that the wheat and tares should both grown together till the time of harvest—a valid interpretation of the parable, but one which stripped the church of the power of persecution. It was natural for the Bishop to be outraged. Kett knew what his fate would be, because three Socinians (Hamond, Lewes and Cole) had been sent to the stake in Norwich, not long before.⁴³

Until the end of his life, Kett continued to maintain that “Christ is not God, but a good man as others be,” the core of anti-Trinitarian theology.⁴⁴ The likelihood that Marlowe would have known of, if not directly been acquainted with, Rutter and (especially) Kett suggests that he would at the very least have been exposed to Socinian beliefs. When coupled with the records of his interest in Arianism and other anti-Trinitarian sects, his own supposed statements, and—finally—the clues within his plays, it seems likely that Marlowe was influenced by Socinianism, whether or not he ultimately believed in its doctrines. (See image below)



43 Muir, 125.

44 Muir, 126.

In addition to *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe's other plays reinforce this thesis. Anita Gilman Sherman, in an extensive examination of Shakespeare's allusions to Poland, birthplace of Socinianism, points to why Marlowe might have been drawn to do the same. One essential reason, Sherman suggests, "was religious toleration. Poland had a long tradition of toleration thanks partly to the quotidian practice of rubbing shoulders with people of different origins and creeds."⁴⁵ Even more explicitly, explains Smith, this "toleration was associated from an early stage with Socinianism."⁴⁶

In *Massacre at Paris*, Henri of Navarre returns from Poland to claim his brother's crown in France, abdicating the Polish throne which he inherited from Sigismund Augustus, the same Sigismund II who appears in *Tamburlaine* and who was known historically for religious toleration.⁴⁷ Edgar C. Knowlton also notes that the B-Text of *Doctor Faustus* also contains a reference to a "princely Sigismond" (*DFb* 3.1.146), whom Bevington and Rasmussen gloss as Emperor Sigismund of Germany. However, the full line reads "Pope Julius swore to princely Sigismond" (*DFb* 3.1.146), and the Pope at the time of Sigismund of Germany's rule would not have been a Julius (Sigismund lived from 1368 to 1437, and the three Juliuses reigned in the fourth century and the sixteenth).⁴⁸ Sigismund Augustus (II) of Poland, however, held the Polish throne from 1548-1572, and his reign did overlap with that of Pope Julius III, to whom he swore he would uphold religious toleration in Poland. This, however, would be anachronistic to the lifetime of Johann Faust—but, Knowlton argues, Sigismund I of Poland (who reigned 1506-1548) not only overlapped with Pope Julius II from 1506-1513, but also received support prior to his accession from Julius II against the Grand-Master of the Teutonic Knights in 1505, enabling Marlowe to include yet another reference to "Sigismond" and Poland in his play.⁴⁹

45 Sherman, 59.

46 Smith, 162.

47 Kot, xiv. It may also be worth noting that Socinus himself worked for Cosimo di Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, cousin to Catherine di Medici, whom Cosimo married to Francis I and who bore Henri III of Valois, the same Henri who abdicated the Polish throne following Socinus's flight to Poland.

48 Knowlton, 14.

49 Knowlton, 14.

Finally, Sherman points out the influence of Polish literature from the mid-16th century over other authors and dramatists in England:

Marcin Kromer's popular chronicle *Polonia* (1555/1577) may have reached some English readers, especially the grisly legends adapted in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* (1572), François de Belleforest's *Cosmographie Universelle* (1575), Anthony Munday's *Brief Chronicle* (1611), and Thomas Beard's *Theatre of God's Judgments* (1597).⁵⁰

Again, we see circumstantial evidence which suggests Marlowe was likely also exposed to Polish ideologies: Anthony Munday was an acquaintance, fellow-spy, and fellow-playwright (with the Admiral's Men) whom Marlowe undoubtedly knew well, and Beard's treatise includes a condemnation of Marlowe in addition to references to Poland. Although both works postdate Marlowe's death, the other texts listed here were published long prior, and would have been both accessible and attractive to a Cambridge-student-turned-spy interested in politics and religion.

In addition to these repeated allusions to toleration in accordance with Socinian politics, Marlowe's last play is a direct condemnation of religious violence. *Massacre at Paris*, produced in 1593 by the Admiral's Men at the Rose, displays a deep anxiety about the conflict between Catholics and Protestants through the lens of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. The play opens with a wedding mass, which "links the Catholic sacrament with the impending slaughter of the massacre," since, John Guillory claims, "the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the Catholic mass can be understood as joined at the root, socially if not linguistically."⁵¹ The events of the play themselves contain a connection to Poland and toleration, as only one year after the historical Massacre, "The Warsaw Confederation of 1573 famously codified freedom from religious persecution," partly in response to the violence in France, which led to the influx of "refugees from all over Europe, including the British Isles...from Catholics to Anabaptists, Mennonites, Hussites, Shwenkfeldians, and various anti-Trinitarians," including Socinians and Arians.⁵²

50 Sherman, 60-61.

51 Bezio, "Marlowe's Violent Reformation," 14; Guillory, 708.

52 Sherman, 60.

As *Massacre at Paris* unfolds, the Duke of Guise and Queen Mother Catherine di Medici propose the Massacre to King Charles IX as a means “to seek your country’s good” (*MP* 3.19), using language shockingly similar to English justifications of anti-Catholicism:

GUISE with this weight I’ll counterpoise a crown
Or with seditions weary all the world;
For this, from Spain the stately Catholics
Sends Indian gold to coin me French ecues;
For this, have I a largess from the Pope,
A pension and a dispensation too;
And by that privilege to work upon,
My policy hath fram’d religion. (*MP* 2.55-62)⁵³

Although this speech “smacks strongly of propaganda, situating Navarre (Elizabeth’s ally) in direct opposition to the Guise and Spain,” like the Guise, Elizabeth’s government chose their “country’s good” rather “Than pity or relieve these upstart heretics” (*MP* 4.20).⁵⁴

Following this cursory introduction, the play turns to the Massacre itself. Joan of Navarre is Marlowe’s first victim—via a pair of poisoned gloves—but the Admiral’s death in scene five is “officially” the first death in the Massacre as he is stabbed and his body thrown into the street per the Guise’s command. The next victim is a preacher—Loreine—“perhaps a reflection of the Elizabethan government’s active pursuit of Catholic priests,” followed by Seroune, and then the scholar Ramus.⁵⁵

As Maryann Feola notes, “it is the attack on Peter Ramus, the most extended Huguenot murder in the play, that forms the heart of Marlowe’s satire of the tension between the reformed and the unreformed.”⁵⁶ In the scene, the play joins Ramus in his study, commenting that “I fear the Guisians have pass’d the bridge / And mean once more to menace me” (*MP* 9.3-4). At that moment, his colleague Taleus—a Catholic—bursts into the room, crying, “Fly, Ramus, fly, if thou wilt save thy life!” (*MP* 9.5). Taleus and Ramus thereby serve—as both John Ronald Glenn and Guillory have

53 Edition used: Christopher Marlowe, *Dido Queen of Carthage*, ed. Oliver.

54 Bezio, 16.

55 Bezio, 17.

56 Feola, 9.

noted—as an example of cross-religious friendship and cooperation.⁵⁷ When asked by Gonzago, one of the Guise’s followers, “What art thou?” (*MP* 9.13), Taleus replies with a courageous assertion of Christian ecumenism: “I am as Ramus is, a Christian” (*MP* 9.14). Retes (another of the Guise’s followers) explains that Taleus “is a Catholic” and they should “let him go” (*MP* 9.15), and Taleus escapes, although Ramus is not so fortunate.

The philosopher begs Anjoy to give him a moment before death, and uses it to make a final statement on the nature of philosophy, linking the French Aristotelian scholars—“blockish Sorbonnists”—to Faustian overreach: “the blockish Sorbonnists / Attribute as much unto their works / As to the service of the eternal God” (*MP* 9.50-52). Following this, the Guise orders his death, as much, Feola suggests, for his unconventional philosophy as his Protestant theology.⁵⁸

Interestingly, Marlowe’s Ramian connection is quite personal: Ramus was living in Paris (and was killed during) the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572 at the same time as Sir Philip Sidney, a Ramian supporter; Ramus had met with Sidney’s father-in-law, the Elizabethan spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham (who was also, notes Glenn, “cousin of Marlowe’s patron Thomas Walsingham”), twice in 1571; Ramus was also a friend and colleague of the Elizabethan “Arch-Conjuror” John Dee who associated with Sidney, Northumberland, Raleigh, and other members of the School of Night; and Marlowe studied Ramist logic at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1581, which heavily “shaped Faustus’s rhetorical method” in *Doctor Faustus*.⁵⁹

Ramus’s function in the play, then, is two-fold. First, the scene clarifies that the religious distinction between Catholic and Protestant need not culminate in violence; Ramus and Taleus serve as a microcosm meant to demonstrate the possibility of international (as well as personal) cooperation across religious lines. Secondly, and

57 Glenn, 371-372; Guillory, 695.

58 Feola, 10.

59 Glenn, 368-369; Parry, 20; Pinciss, 254.

perhaps more importantly, the scene of Ramus's death showcases the inevitably tragic consequences of mingling politics and religion. As Glenn notes,

Ramus was a conscientious Protestant whose break with the Roman Church cost his career and ultimately his life. Yet, in his attitude toward religion there was a certain tolerant independence distinguishing him from the Protestants Marlowe called "Hypocritical asses." He abandoned the Catholic Church because of its authoritarianism and refusal to correct abuses, but he never fully accepted the Geneva church, in which similar tendencies were increasingly visible.⁶⁰

Similarly, Marlowe's inclusion of Ramus's death in *Massacre at Paris* criticizes the authoritarianism of not only the Catholic Church (qua the Guise), but also the religiously-motivated anti-Catholic policies of the Elizabethan government, which just as militantly (if more surreptitiously) purged its colleges—Oxford and Marlowe's own Cambridge—of religious dissidents as the Guise in this scene.

After Ramus's death, the Guise orders the extermination of "a hundred Protestants / Which we have chas'd into the river Seine" (*MP* 9.56-57):

GUISE My Lord of Anjoy, there are a hundred Protestants
Which we have chas'd into the river Seine
That swim about and so preserve their lives:
How may we do? I fear me they will live.
DUMAINE Go place some men upon the bridge
With bows and darts to shoot at them they see,
And sink them in the river as they swim. (*MP* 9.56-62)

Next, the Guise and his men kill the two tutors to Prince Condé, followed by "five or six Protestants with books" (*MP* 12.0.1). The demographics of Marlowe's *Massacre* victims, those in the Seine aside, are noteworthy: the vast majority are either scholars or clergy.⁶¹ Marlowe, as a government agent, held a certain amount of cynicism for both scholars—as those likely to defect to Rheims—and preachers as the counterpart to the Jesuits hunted by Walsingham's agents, including Marlowe.

It is noteworthy that Marlowe returns to the idea of the "country's good" following these scenes; at Henry III's coronation, Lorainne presses Catherine to "insinuate with the King / And tell him that

⁶⁰ Glenn, 371.

⁶¹ Bezio, 17; Kocher, 365.

'tis for his country's good, / And common profit of religion" (*MP* 14.57-59). Lorainne's syntax summons the tenor of the English government's attempts to secure the loyalty of their noble subjects:

The Cardinal's language mimics the sentiments contained in the Elizabethan Bond of Association (1584)—requiring Elizabeth's subjects to defend her with their lives, targeted specifically at Recusants and, particularly, at Mary Queen of Scots, whose death it assured. The Bond, like the Cardinal's exhortation, prioritized the sovereign not only as the head of the nation, but—as Elizabeth herself reminded Parliament at its closing in 1585—of “the Church, whose overruler God hath made me, whose negligence cannot be excused if any schism or errors heretical were suffered.”⁶²

The linkage of prosecutorial language with governmental security would have been intimately familiar not only to Marlowe as an agent, but to anyone in the popular audience familiar with anti-Catholic treatises or sermons.

The play then skips forward more than a decade to the deaths of Henry III and the Guise in 1588-1589, as General Joyeux is killed offstage in retribution for the Massacre, and the Protestants, under the leadership of Navarre, rise up against their erstwhile Catholic oppressors. In scene eighteen, Marlowe makes the play's first direct reference to England, turning the audience's view on an ostensibly happier scene of Protestant victory:

NAVARRE But God, we know, will always put them down
That lift themselves against the perfect truth,
Which I'll maintain so long as life doth last,
And with the Queen of England join my force
To beat the papal monarch from our lands. (*MP* 18.12-17)

In 1593, the alliance between Elizabeth and Henri IV (Navarre, in the play) was an historical fact, one seemingly celebrated by Marlowe's characterization here. However, its close proximity to Lorainne's speech in scene fourteen and its syntactic similarity to both Lorainne and the Guise problematizes this relationship. Furthermore, Penny Roberts explains,

Henry of Navarre was to embrace Catholicism the year after Marlowe is thought to have written the play...It may be argued that Marlowe, anticipating the conversion which was widely rumoured, was demonstrating yet again the cynical use of religion as a cloak for personal political gain.⁶³

62 Bezio, 18; Elizabeth I, 182, qtd. in Bezio, 18.

63 Roberts, 439.

As I have argued elsewhere, if “Marlowe was aware of these rumors, then his mitigation of Navarre’s heroism makes sense.”⁶⁴ Yet Henry III’s sudden turn against the Guise further complicates Navarre’s heroism by linking him—through Henry III—to the Guise and his Catholic faction.⁶⁵

When he openly rejects the Guise, Henry III specifically invokes his enemy’s allegiance to the Pope and Spain through the failed Armada invasion of England:

KING HENRY This is the traitor that hath spent my gold
In making foreign wars and civil broils.
Did he not draw a sort of English priests
From Douai to the seminary at Rheims
To hatch forth treason ’gainst their natural Queen?
Did he not cause the King of Spain’s huge fleet
To threaten England and to menace me? (*MP* 21.99-105)

For Elizabethans—as for most of Europe in the period—religion and politics were inextricably intertwined, and the “dichotomization of loyalty to religion verses loyalty to the state was commonplace.”⁶⁶ In Socinian doctrine, however, church and state were kept separate, and religious toleration—even to the point where proselytization was not actively encouraged—formed an essential part of the Polish Brethren’s teachings. Henry’s speech, by aligning nation and religion, illustrates the negative consequences of state religion, just as the fact that the Guise acted “for the Pope’s sake” (*MP* 14.23) makes him a “traitor to the crown of France” (*MP* 14.21) and echoes official English policy.

In the final scene of the play, Henry is stabbed by a Jacobin Friar in retaliation for the deaths of Guise and Lorraine. Henry’s dying proclamation acts as much as a warning to the Elizabethan government as it is an historical observation of France:

KING HENRY Tell her, for all this, that I hope to live,
Which if I do, the papal monarch goes
To wrack, and antichristian kingdom falls.
These bloody hands shall tear his triple crown
And fire accursed Rome about his ears.
I’ll fire his crazed buildings, and incense

64 Bezio, 19.

65 Bezio, 19; MacKenzie, 77.

66 Bezio, 19.

The papal towers to kiss the holy earth.
Navarre, give me thy hand: I here do swear
To ruinate that wicked Church of Rome
That hatcheth up such bloody practices,
And here protest eternal love to thee,
And to the Queen of England specially,
Whom God hath bless'd for hating papistry. (*MP* 24.57-69)

That Henry's last words are to Elizabeth through her Agent—"Salute the Queen of England in my name, / And tell her, Henry dies her faithful friend" (*MP* 24.104-105)—further suggests the parallelism between French and English religious policies, while "The injection of an Anglo-Gallic alliance thus serves as yet another indication of Marlowe's distrust of the Elizabethan government's religious policy."⁶⁷ Similarly, Matthew Martin argues that Marlowe's audience, who would have embraced the propaganda of the Elizabethan government, was being asked "to recognize its own complicity in the historical trauma [the play] dramatizes."⁶⁸ If the audience were complicit in the religiously-motivated violence perpetrated (and perpetuated) by the government, then Marlowe, an agent of that very same government, was far more than merely "complicit."

In the play's final scene, Marlowe acknowledges this role through the presence of the unnamed English Agent, present for Henry III's death. Although there are some who "suggest that the Agent is meant to be Marlowe" himself, it is more historically accurate to argue that the Agent is in fact meant to be Marlowe's spymaster, Walsingham, who was in residence in Paris as Ambassador to France at the time of the Massacre, and who was personally responsible for rescuing multiple English and French Protestants.⁶⁹

The final lines—Navarre's promise that "Rome and all those popish prelates there / Shall curse the time that e'er Navarre was king / And rul'd in France by Henry's fatal death" (*MP* 24.109-111)—end the play with a promise to continue the same violence with which it began. Even more importantly, this profession rings hollow when we consider that between 1589 and 1598—when Marlowe himself was an active agent moving between France, England, and the

⁶⁷ Bezio, 20.

⁶⁸ Martin, 38.

⁶⁹ Bezio, 21; Kirk, 193.

Netherlands—Henri struggled to hold on to the crown, failing to recapture Paris from Catholic forces in 1591 and losing Rouen in 1592, finally abjuring Protestantism on July 24, 1593, just over six months after Marlowe's play appeared at the Rose and under three months after Marlowe himself met a violent end.⁷⁰

It can therefore come as no surprise that Marlowe's plays are deeply cynical about religion and the role of faith in state-sanctioned (and perpetrated) violence. Although in his work Marlowe does not explicitly demand a separation of church and state, his drama nevertheless makes clear the potential for extreme violence contained in a theocratic system. Although he does not explicitly say so, the alternative offered by Socinian doctrine—the division of the spiritual and political spheres, and religious tolerance—is nevertheless painfully clear. For Marlowe—who would be dead at the hands of a fellow-spy within six months of *Massacre at Paris*'s appearance at the Rose—religion, or, more specifically, religiously-motivated violence, was central to both life and work. From Canterbury where he was born to Cambridge, Rheims, the Netherlands, and London, the conflict between Catholic and Protestant formed the essential backdrop to his careers as both spy and playwright. Perhaps because of his experience with the former, Marlowe came to be jaded by both religion and politics, revealing in the latter—particularly *Doctor Faustus* and *Massacre at Paris*—a deeply-felt anger at intolerance and religious persecution, whether abroad or at the hands of his own government.

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70 Knecht, 79.

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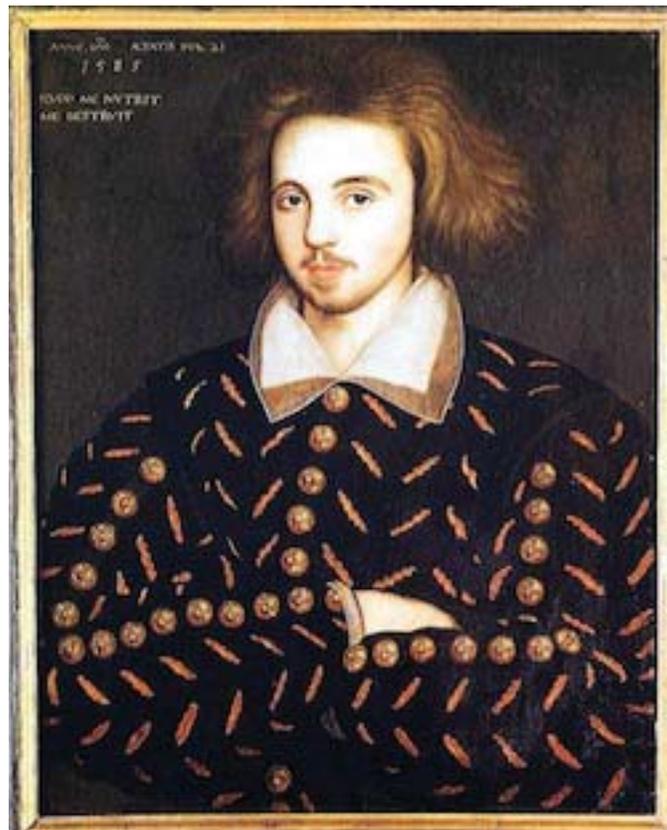
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*Anonymous Portrait believed to be Christopher Marlowe
Corpus Christi College, Cambridge*