In the final scene of Doctor Faustus, a group of scholars gathers in the street to discuss the terrible events of the previous night. Blood-curdling cries were heard coming from Faustus’s house, which was glowing as if on fire. Faustus’s concerned friends and colleagues quickly discover the aftermath of the horror, as they encounter his limbs strewn upon the ground. “The devils whom Faustus served have torn him thus,” one of the scholars rightly surmises (5.3.8). (Faustus had, of course, made a pact with the devil, selling his soul for seemingly infinite powers and a guarantee of twenty-four more years on earth.) This final scene is brief, comprised of a mere nineteen lines, but it enacts a sudden and powerful change in perspective. Immediately prior to the scholars’ entrance on the stage, the audience had witnessed the cause of the shrieks and flames. Thunder rang through the theater, a posse of devils took the stage, and the miserable Doctor was dragged off to his death, desperately screaming to the last,

O, mercy, heaven, look not so fierce on me!  
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!  
Ugly hell, gape not. Come not, Lucifer!  
I’ll burn my books. O, Mephistopheles! (5.2.182–85)

The scholars’ subsequent report of these events quickly translates them from terrors experienced firsthand into yesterday’s news.

In their plans for Faustus’s funeral, the scholars continue to render the intimate drama of his death into an occasion for public edification. The sight of his severed limbs, a moment that would be climactic in another play, is here reduced to dénouement and moral emblem. The Second Scholar bluntly remarks,

Well, gentlemen, though Faustus’s end be such  
As every Christian heart laments to think on,  
Yet […]  
We’ll give his mangled limbs due burial;  
And all the students, clothed in mourning black,  
Shall wait upon his heavy funeral. (5.3.13–19)

Faustus’s end, as psychologically complicated and tortured as it was, will be condensed into a moral allegory, and the audience for this revised drama will be a captive one of black-clad students. The reference to clothing may seem oddly trivial in the final two lines of the play, but it serves here as a stark distinction to Faustus’s earlier exclamation that with his newfound powers he will “fill the public schools with silk, / Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad” (1.1.89–90). We can imagine that in the rowdy atmosphere of the early modern theater the promise of silken finery might have raised a cheer from the substantial student contingent in the audience. Indeed, Faustus’s altruistic promise seems oddly out of place in his otherwise narcissistic fantasy of power, suggesting that it is inserted precisely for the purposes of provoking a sympathetic response from the generally impoverished student population. But if the attraction of silk seduced some students into sympathy with the be-deviled Faustus, the Second Scholar’s somber re-clothing of the students, and the declaration of universal and compulsive attendance at Faustus’s funeral, deftly puts them back in their proper obedient place. Just as the scholars’ report of Faustus’s death seems to throw cold water on one of the most emotionally and dramatically packed moments of the English stage, so too their words attempt to reign in the imaginations of students who might have envisioned themselves, decked in silken finery, flying through the skies with the magnificent Faustus. These final lines seem to signal an end to theatrical fantasy and the beginning of an occasion for moral contemplation.

The scholars’ final appearance on the stage thus subtly transforms the space of the theater into the space of the lecture hall. The transition is not as abrupt as it might seem—Doctor Faustus itself revolves around university life. The setting is self-consciously and insistently the university city of Wittenburg, and the central props are the books from which various characters read. The play is about learning and the learned. What, then, are we to learn from this play? In the Epilogue, the Chorus exhorts us to “regard [Faustus’s] hellish fall” (4) as a deterrent from practicing the black arts. Fair enough, but it is highly doubtful that many in the audience seriously required a warning against engaging in necromancy or signing contracts with the devil. Like a teacher sidestepping a difficult question, the Second Scholar’s and the Chorus’s imputed attempts to set up Faustus as a type of moral lesson do not address what, to many Elizabethan spectators, would have been the most important and troubling issues raised by the play: where will you go when you die? And what will determine how you get there? Rather than simply telling us to stay away from dangerous books, Doctor Faustus dramatizes some of the pressing theological issues of the day. But if, as the scholars at the end of the play would like, Doctor Faustus offers a moral, it is hardly a clear one. In fact, as the play takes us into the murky realm of Elizabethan theology, the moral might be that one can’t find a moral—a frustrating and fearful message that expresses the religious confusion of the day.

During his own time as a student at Cambridge, Christopher Marlowe undoubtedly had been exposed to debates over free will and predestination. It is quite likely that he attended, and almost certain that he knew of, the notorious university debates on the subject. As a master’s degree student, Marlowe received extensive training in theology, and this learning is reflected in Doctor Faustus. The play lies at a cultural and theological nexus, where residual modes of Catholicism intersected and competed with emerging concepts of Protestantism. At stake here is no less than the role of human free will in God’s cosmos. Are the actions of human beings self-directed? And if human beings possess agency, or the willful control of their actions, can this agency affect salvation and a person’s fate in the afterlife? The initial line of the Epilogue, again, seems to provide us with something of a pat answer: “Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight.” The subjunctive “might” here implies that Faustus could have chosen a pious life; his downfall is the consequence of his own free will. Adding to this idea is the passive construction (“the branch is cut”) that distances and exonerates God.

Theology of the Reformation marked a radical departure from this medieval system, in which the afterlife was subject to human agency and free will. The starting point of the Reformation is generally taken to be the moment in 1517 when a young monk named Martin Luther nailed his famous Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenburg. In this document Luther protest ed many of the corruptions he perceived in the church and especially challenged its exploitation of the purgatorial system. Luther advanced the revolutionary claim that human beings are not saved through good works, but rather by faith alone. It was God’s grace, and the individual’s faith in that grace, that guaranteed entrance into heaven. This declaration rocked the foundations of the church, especially the exploitation of the purgatorial system. Luther’s ideas were built on an elaborate earthly hierarchy and spiritual network. Not only did the doctrine of sola fide (“faith alone”) eliminate the idea of the balance sheet, but it transformed the relationship between the individual and God: no longer was that relationship to be mediated by priests or the intercession of saints. Instead, every individual was called upon to have a direct and personal relationship with God.

The Western Christian church thus split in two. Roman Catholics remained within the traditional church and maintained their allegiance to the pope; Protestants formed alternative churches and repudiated the authority of the pope and his clergy. On the Continent, the Reformation would lead to wars and horrific massacres, as Catholic and Protestant regions clashed. In England, the Reformation would also lead to bloodshed, although on a smaller scale, as hundreds of martyrs were burned at the stake. The English Reformation can be seen as a two-pronged movement, with changes taking place both at the level of the government and at the level of the laity. There has been a great deal of discussion amongst historians as to whether the English Reformation took place from the top down or from the bottom up—whether it was driven by official decrees or popular action. In the end it was the combination of these forces, sometimes working together and sometimes at odds, that produced the changes in the English church.

Let’s begin at the top. We might consider the official beginning of the English Reformation to be King Henry VIII’s break with Rome in 1534. The impetus for this move was not, however, Henry’s heartfelt Lutheran convictions—he had even written against Luther’s ideas. Rather, Henry’s decision to break his allegiance to the pope was the result of his love life and its ensuing political complications. Married to Catherine of Aragon, who had borne him no living sons, and in love with Anne Boleyn, Henry requested a papal sanction for a divorce from Catherine in order to marry Anne. After the pope repeatedly refused this request, the king simply declared that the English church no longer acknowledged the authority of the pope and that he, Henry, was now the English church’s spiritual head. (And as head of the church he promptly married Anne, who soon lost hers after she disappointed Henry by bearing him a daughter instead of the son he so desired.) At this point the English “Reformation” was one in name only; Henry’s religious views were conservative, and the church’s day-to-day services and theology remained largely unchanged. But at Henry’s death in 1547, his ardently Protestant son, Edward VI (the nine-year-old child of wife number three, Jane Seymour), assumed the throne and promoted a genuine theological transformation. Then at Edward’s death in 1553, Henry’s ardently Catholic daughter Mary (child of wife number one, Catharine of Aragon) assumed the throne, declared England once again a papal nation, and began burning outspoken Protestants (earning herself the nickname of “Bloody Mary”). And at Mary’s death in 1558, Henry’s Protestant daughter Elizabeth (child of wife number two, Anne Boleyn) assumed the throne and returned England to Protestantism.

This royal see-sawing on matters ecclesiastical did not go unnoticed by the populace. Thanks to a cultural fascination with their national history, English men and women at the end of the sixteenth century were often aware that in recent memory their country had been Catholic, then Protestant, then Catholic, then Protestant. Throughout these changes, the official doctrine on the afterlife—arguably the central doctrine of the church and that with which parishioners would be most concerned—kept shifting. The doctrine of purgatory, for example, was in, then out, then in, then out again. Given the fickle nature of the national religion, in which official teachings on the very nature of God were subject to reversal and revision with every new regime, it is not surprising that individuals looked less and less to their political leaders for spiritual guidance. By the
time of Queen Elizabeth, the English embraced an impressive range of religious opinions, from radical Protestant ideas to entrenched Catholic loyalties. While one could test the patience of even the tolerant Elizabeth by aggressively advocating extreme unorthodox beliefs, on the whole the Elizabethan religious culture was quite elastic and accommodated this diversity of belief. This religious diversity was spurred by the growing (Protestant) sense that religious opinions were a matter of personal responsibility, and this idea fuelled a tremendous outpouring of religious publications. To a degree that might seem strange to us today, sixteenth-century men and women were avid consumers of religious literature, devouring short pamphlets as well as ponderous theological tomes.

In the end, the theological ideas that ultimately came to dominate late-sixteenth-century religious life were not Lutheran, but Calvinist. Jean Calvin, a reformer who lived in Geneva, is most known for his theology based on double predestination (often simply called predestination). This was not a new idea, having been a tacit part of church doctrine for centuries, but Calvin brought the concept to the fore and worked through its spiritual consequences, which could be at once exhilarating and terrifying. According to predestinarian theology, God determined at the creation of the world that there would be a certain number of human beings who would receive his grace and ultimately dwell in heaven, and a certain number who would be damned and ultimately condemned to hell. The decision as to who was elect and who was reprobate (as the two categories were known) had already been made, and there was nothing human beings could do to alter these designations.

This theological system is the antithesis of a system relying on purgatory, good works, and prayer. Under a purgatorial system, as we have seen, human beings have a great deal of control over their afterlife. Under a system of double predestination, by contrast, human beings have virtually none. Free will, the idea of human agency, and the balance sheet are no longer factors in God’s judgment. Modern commentators have found the idea of predestination “depressing,” but that is not necessarily how it was viewed in the sixteenth century. Reading Calvin’s magnum opus, entitled *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (which, unlike many of the theological treatises of the day, is written in an intimate, colloquial style), was clearly a life-altering experience for many. Although this text emphasizes the awesome and terrible majesty of God, it also provides an exhilarating liberation for those who feel they are among the elect. Had the theology been perceived as purely depressing, it is doubtful that it would have captured the hearts and minds of so many.

The fervor of Calvin’s theology was tempered, however, in its practical application in the parish. Clergymen faced two primary difficulties in the dissemination of the doctrine on a local level. First, there is the argument that, if election and reprobation have already been determined, what is the point of leading a moral life? In principle, it seems that the elect could engage in all sorts of debauchery and still be assured of salvation. The answer to this objection is that the elect would not, perforce, engage in debauchery, but would naturally lead a pious life; the wanton libertine must therefore be among the reprobate. Second, there is the fundamental question, how do I know if I am among the elect? This is the issue that caused the most spiritual anguish for parishioners and the most pastoral difficulties for clergy. According to Calvin, the answer is that only God knows for certain the identity of the elect, although a heartfelt faith is a pretty good indication of election. However, in a small passage in the *Institutes*, Calvin warns that there is such a thing as false or temporary faith. This is a type of faith that God gives to the reprobate just to give them a taste of what they’re missing. Thus, even the most devout and pious of ministers, convinced of his genuine and heartfelt faith, could in reality be a reprobate just like the drunken libertine.

These two questions threatened to plunge parishioners into a state of moral anarchy or spiritual despair. Thus Calvin’s successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, reintroduced the idea of good works, and it is Beza’s adaptation of Calvin’s theology that made its way into England. The English dissemination of (Beza’s) Calvinism was accomplished in large part through the works of the best-selling author William Perkins. With catchy titles such as *A Treatise tending vnto a declaration whether a man be in the estate of damnation or in the estate of grace: and if he be in the first, how he may in time come out of it: if in the second, how he may discern it (1589)* and *A Case of Conscience, the Greatest that ever was: how a man may know whether he be the childe of God, or no (1592)*, Perkins’s books provided personal guidance for scrutinizing one’s state of grace. Unfortunately, Perkins often tied himself in forensic knots when he tried to clarify the doctrine of temporary faith, and his works probably created even more public anxiety about the utterly inscrutable nature of election. Like Beza and unlike Calvin, Perkins ultimately turned to the idea of good works and personal introspection (which fostered the practice of journal writing) as a means of ascertaining one’s state of grace.

We return, then, to a religious culture that was concerned with tabulation and good works. This is not to come full circle: the dominant theology at the end of the sixteenth century was strikingly different from that at its beginning. Belief in predestination precluded any actual human influence on the afterlife, and doing good works or keeping diaries was simply a way to gather clues about what had already been written in God’s book. But this emphasis on introspection and good works supplied the semblance of human agency in eschatological matters. Furthermore, the distinction between good works that were performed as a natural consequence of being elect and good works performed in order to assure salvation could be a fine one that was lost on a significant part of the population. There is no doubt that Protestant ministers marshaled an extensive campaign to re-educate the laity through sermons or that there was an enormous quantity of religious literature that was purchased by a public concerned about its afterlife. But, people being what they are, (lengthy) sermons may not have been universally comprehended, and (long) books bought with good intentions may not have been entirely read. While only the extremely ignorant or antisocial could have been completely unaware of the widespread discussion about predestination, only the extremely zealous or dedicated would have been entirely learned in its doctrine. For the majority of the populace, the theological distinctions surrounding the efficacy of good works may well have been fuzzy, and popular religious thought may well have been a muddled combination of new and old.

Elizabethan theology was, then, a messy affair. The Reformation was neither a sudden, effective campaign of unambiguous changes nor a steady progression toward a clear end of transformation. Rather, for much of the sixteenth century the English lurched forward and backward, right to left, in uneven and unsteady paces. Moreover, the disjunction between the doctrine of the top, that promulgated by the bishops du jour and the doctrine of the bottom, those beliefs and practices maintained by the least devout and pious of parishioners, would naturally lead a pious life; the wanton libertine must therefore be among the reprobate. Second, there is the fundamental question, how do I know if I am among the elect? This is the issue that caused the most spiritual anguish for parishioners and the most pastoral difficulties for clergy. According to Calvin, the answer is that only God knows for certain the identity of the elect, although a heartfelt faith is a pretty good
created at any given point theological confusion and contradiction. The belief in purgatory, for example, long outlived its official demise. And good works, introduced into Calvin’s theology by later divines trying to mitigate the anxieties of parishioners, might look to many like the good works that were earlier prescribed for saving one’s soul. Because of the great variety of learned theological opinions, and the wide latitude of popular doctrinal understanding, there is really not such a thing as “Elizabethan religious thought.”

It is in this regard that Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus might be considered a quintessential Elizabethan play. Like the culture that produced it, the theology of Doctor Faustus is messy, ambiguous, and often contradictory. The play seems to vacillate between a theology based on free will and God’s forgiveness and a theology based on Calvin’s conception of double predestination. Alone in his study, Faustus is confronted with opposing angels, and their exchange in many ways epitomizes the dilemma of the play:

Faustus: Contrition, prayer, repentance—what of these?
Good Angel: O, they are means to bring thee unto heaven.
Bad Angel: Rather illusions, fruits of lunacy,
That make them foolish that use them most. (2.1.16–19)

Are human beings agents in their salvation, or is the notion that people can affect their afterlife an “illusion” and “lunacy”? The play’s answer is a frustrating “yes”—to both questions.

The fact that Faustus converses with a Good Angel and a Bad Angel is itself a symptom of the play’s complicated relationship between old and new. Just as the medieval belief in purgatory continued well into the period of the English Renaissance, so too this play represents an interpenetration of residual and emergent genres and characters. The angels are a holdover from the allegorical medieval genre known as the morality play. One of the best known is Everyman, in which the central character Everyman encounters Death, who informs him that God wants to see his book of accounts. Desperate and unprepared, Everyman unsuccessfully seeks help from those people and abilities on which he had relied in life (friends, relations, knowledge, beauty, strength, etc.) until he is finally aided by his Good Works. Here medieval theology is boiled down to its simplest elements for the edification and entertainment of a predominantly illiterate audience.

Faustus, however, hardly represents the medieval Everyman: instead, he is the epitome of the Renaissance Man. This figure is often self-made (having raised himself from lower social origins) and possess a wide-ranging expertise in areas of learning, from science to the arts. Doctor Faustus, we learn from the opening of the play, has mastered philosophy, medicine, law, and theology. Indeed, his descent into the black arts at first seems to be the product of his intellectual ennui, as he searches for new challenges and intellectual heights. His summoning of the devils is driven in part by his burning desire for more knowledge, and he uses his magical abilities in the potentially admirable quest “to find the secrets of astronomy” and “to prove cosmography” (Chorus, act 3), both driving ambitions of the sixteenth century. Instead of an Everyman, the generalized representative of humanity, we have in Faustus a highly individualized, complex, and modern character, one whom in many respects epitomizes the ideals of his age.

interaction of this man with the allegorical angels thus presents an encounter that is only anachronistic, but one that intersplices characters from wildly divergent genres. If a cowboy from a John Wayne western wandered into a James Bond spy thriller, the result of this generic intermingling is a world that is morally ambiguous, as both the old and the new, the angels and Faustus, seem alternately—or simultaneously—to be subject ofvalorization and critique.

Theological contradictions also follow these generic complications. As Faustus begins to flirt with magic, he is drawn toward the idea that he could command spirits to “resolve [him] of all ambiguities” (1.1.79), but the doctrinal ambiguities only continue to expand over the course of the play. On the one hand, we are presented with the idea that repentance is a choice that is open to Faustus. Mephistopheles says that the devil will fly to a person when “he is in danger to be damned” (1.3.48), and Faustus speaks of “surrender[ing] up to him his soul” (1.3.88). These comments suggest that damnation is not a foregone conclusion and that Faustus has control over his own salvation. On the other hand, Faustus reasons that “we must sin, / And so consequently die. / What doctrine call you this?” (1.3.194–195). These doctrinal contradictions pervade the play. Purgatory, for example, seems to exist within the play’s theological system. When Faustus becomes invisible, he plays tricks on the pope, the Archbishop explains, “I think it be some ghost crept out of purgatory” (3.2.79–80), at which point the pope commands the monks to say a prayer for the dead in order to appease the ghost. The pope, however, is presented as the butt of the joke here, and his authority is thus called into question; his response could be designed to evoke laughter from a Protestant audience that might view purgatory as a papist superstition. At the end of his life, Faustus himself desperately hopes for and ultimately rejects a form of purgatorial compromise:

O, if my soul must suffer for my sin,
Impose some end to my incessant pain.
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be saved.
No end is limited to damned souls. (5.2.162–66)

The question of repentance, in particular, is presented in a way that seems almost designed to torment audiences with half-answered questions. Here, for example, Faustus rejects a form of purgatorial compromise:

Faustus: If heaven was made for man, ’twas made for me.
I will renounce this magic and repent.

[Enter the two angels.]

Good Angel: Faustus, repent! Yet, God will pity thee.
Bad Angel: Thou art a spirit. God cannot pity thee.
Faustus: Who buzzeth in mine ears I am a spirit?
   Be I a devil, yet God may pity me;
   Yea, God will pity me if I repent.

Bad Angel: Ay, but Faustus never shall repent.  
   [Exeunt (angels)]

Faustus: My heart is hardened; I cannot repent.
   Scarcely can I name salvation, faith, or heaven. (2.3.10-21)

The "may" in "God may pity me" opens up a theological space that Faustus had earlier closed off with his "musts." But the prospect offered by "may" is again shut down by the "cannots." What does it mean that "God cannot pity thee"? If this means that God is unable to forgive Faustus, what does this do to the notion of an omnipotent God? What is God unable to do, and why doesn't he transcend even his own laws? If the "cannot" means that God is unwilling to accept Faustus's repentance, what does this do to the idea of a forgiving God? For the Christian, the choices presented here are equally disturbing: either God is not all-powerful, or he is hard-hearted. Similarly, Faustus's contention that he "cannot repent" due to his own hard-heartedness raises significant questions. Is he unable to repent because of his own weakness and failings? Or does the passive construction infer that another force has hardened his heart, and therefore prevented him from repenting?

Such theological dilemmas are further complicated by Faustus's own personality. From the very beginning of the play, Faustus has the unattractive habit of blaming others for his actions, often positioning himself as a passive entity. For his failings and temptations, he blames Aristotle ("Sweet Analytics, 'tis thou hast ravished me" [1.1.6]), the devil ("wicked Mephistopheles, [... th]ou hast deprived me of those joys" [2.3.2-3]), the stars ("You stars that reigned at my nativity, / Whose influence hath allotted death and hell" [5.2.81-82]), and, in the end, even his parents ("Curst be the parents that engendered me!" [5.2.105]). He repeatedly views himself as a victim of the world and his actions as the consequences of outside forces ("I would weep, but the devil draws in my tears" [5.2.27-28]). Perhaps this is the portrait of a man living in a Calvinist universe, where his destiny is beyond his control, or perhaps this is the image of a whiny narcissist, someone who refuses to accept responsibility for his actions. Perhaps he is the product of a Calvinist system, or perhaps the theological system of the play is skewed and distorted by his personal failings. If Faustus is the lens through which we see divinity, it is a clouded one indeed.

Ultimately, it is not merely Faustus's personality that is called into question, but God's—if divinity can be said to have "personality." Faustus's vision of God is that of a wrathful judge; near his end, he exclaims in terror, "see where God / Stretches out his arm and bends his irate brows!" (5.2.74-75). Yet, if we follow the predestinarian bent of Faustus's understanding of God, this is a wrathful judge who has already judged, one who condemns those whom he himself has damned. Faustus's understanding of the divine is not so far from the Calvinist understanding of God. The medieval God, the God of Everyman, is remote and inaccessible, but perhaps more comprehensible. He determines salvation according to a set of established principles and procedures, and these blanket all of humanity; not only does this God inform people of the rules, but he applies them evenly and consistently. The Calvinist God, by contrast, requires a direct, unmediated relationship with the individual, but this relationship is potentially more terrifying.
reprobate are destined for everlasting torment, but when Faustus is shown wriggling on the pin and panic-stricken in his last hour, members of an audience may think again. If this is what happened, for some at least, then there are two traps in the play. One is set by God for Dr. Faustus; the other is set by Marlowe, for God” (237). The dramatic enactment of damnation may have rendered public the private anxieties that arise from reading Perkins. It may also have provoked, and tacitly and temporarily licensed, the anger of an audience facing a new and inscrutable God. If, in the mysteries of a predestinarian world, even the most pious member of the audience could be among the reprobate, then Faustus could be an Everyman after all, commanding the audience’s sympathies and self-identification. It should be remembered that at the turn of the seventeenth century this play was a phenomenal success.

**Doctor Faustus** has continued to capture the modern imagination. Among literary critics, this play has been hotly contested. For several decades, critics were divided between those who saw the play as “reflect[ing] Christian doctrine as presented in Scripture and Tradition,”[7] citing “the powerful and consistent Christian outlook of the play,”[8] and those who saw the play as anti-Christian.[9] The strident division between these orthodox and heterodox views in part reflects the conflicted biography of Christopher Marlowe himself, a man who began his brief adulthood as a theology student and ended it a notorious figure accused of atheism. But in large part this critical division was informed by an understanding of the English Reformation as a unified and near universal movement. Recent historical research, however, has revealed the fallacy of the idea of a clear religious tradition in the Elizabethan era. Marlowe and his Doctor Faustus were not alone in their conflicted relationships to free will, predestination, and, ultimately, God—they shared these feelings of confusion and frustration with many in the audience.

**NOTES**


5. As many scholars have noted, Faustus’s reasoning depends upon distorted or aborted quotations from Scripture; see Joseph Westlund, “The Orthodox Framework of Marlowe’s Faustus,” Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900 3 (1963): 193-94.


**READING LIST**


