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'Strange Enthusiastical Exhortations': Distress, Religious Identity and the English Reformation

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This article uses letters from BL, MS Lansdowne 99 to explore how a diverse group of individuals experiencing mental and emotional distress utilised religious ideas as a primary means of interpreting their experience and expressing themselves to those in authority in Elizabethan England. It shifts emphasis away from the causes and towards the construction and experience of distress. It argues that such letters shed important light on the character and progress of the English Reformation by the closing decades of the sixteenth century, as well as on the operation of the process of Reformation itself.

'Verely I do unfaynidly beleve that except you do truly & spedely repent and amend your wicked and most vield and abominable lyves, that god may mitigate his wrath and VENGANSE most terribly preparid against you, bothe you and your howses shalbe turnid to dvnges and ashees BY FIRE AND SWORDE.'[1] So wrote William Renolds in one of a series of letters sent to Queen Elizabeth I and her *de facto* chief minister William Cecil, Lord Burghley.[2] Eight of Renolds's letters are preserved in the English State Papers, totalling almost 20,000 words

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[1] BL, MS Lansdowne 99, no. 31, fo. 81r.

[2] His last letter is dated 1601 meaning he cannot have been the Catholic convert Reynolds who died in 1594: J. Blom and F. Blom, 'Rainolds [Reynolds], William (1544?–1594), Roman Catholic priest and author', *ODNB*, at

of extraordinary prophecy, piety and paranoia.[3] All but one are housed within MS Lansdowne 99,[4] a collection of letters and other documents which scholars have described variously as 'labelled "file under L for Lunatic"'; 'a remarkable collection of prophetic letters' from 'religious enthusiasts'; and '"letters of several madmen"'.[5] Certainly that is how the letters have been understood for most of their history, for they are adorned with a series of annotations which describe their authors and contents as 'deranged', 'frantic', 'mad', 'crazy' and 'insane'.[6] Some of these annotations were made contemporaneously by Burghley's secretariat, some were added at the turn of the eighteenth century by the antiquarian John Strype, and some come from the pencil of the nineteenth-century archivist Francis Douce, as well as from the printed document descriptions in the nineteenth-century catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts. Renolds's missives are part of an identifiable group of around forty letters in MS Lansdowne 99, penned by around twenty-five individuals between about 1572 and 1596, which combine evidence of significant mental and emotional distress with striking religious rhetoric.[7] The very

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-23030>. His last letter to Cecil was in 1601.

[3] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 10, fo. 25v; no. 19, fos 22r–26v; no. 31, fos 81r–87v; Cecil papers, Hatfield House, CP 83/62.

[4] The BL, MS Lansdowne manuscripts are composed of 1,245 volumes of material. Volumes 1–122 form a subset known as the 'Burghley papers' because of their provenance, having passed into the possession of one of Lord Burghley's principal secretaries, Sir Michael Hicks (and his descendants), thence to the antiquarian John Strype in the seventeenth century and Lord Shelburne, first marquis of Lansdowne in the eighteenth, before ending up under the custodianship of the British Museum, and today the British Library. The Burghley papers are just one portion of the archive of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and his son Robert, first earl of Salisbury: the other portions are contained within the State Papers at The National Record Office at Kew, and the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House.

[5] Steven Clucas, '"This paradoxall restitution iudaicall": the apocalyptic correspondence of John Dee and Roger Edwardes', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* xliii (2012), 512; Alexandra Walsham, '"Frantick Hacket": prophecy, sorcery, insanity, and the Elizabethan Puritan Movement', *HJ* xli/1 (1998), 50 n. 111, and *Providence in early modern England*, Oxford 1999, 204; Katharine Hodgkin, *Madness in seventeenth-century autobiography*, Basingstoke 2007, 8–9.

[6] See also Walsham, '"Frantick Hacket"', 50 n. 111; Cecile Zinberg, 'The usable dissenting past: John Strype and Elizabethan Puritanism', in Michael Moody and Robert Cole (eds), *The dissenting tradition: essays for Leland H. Carlson*, Athens, OH 1975, 123–39; and *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts in the British Museum with indexes of persons, places, and matters*, London 1819, 190–2.

[7] MS Lansdowne 99 comprises 109 separately-catalogued entries, grouped thematically, and progressing through apparent mental disturbance, scurrilous verse, patronage, counterfeit and forgery, and duelling and conflict: *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 190–2. There are a total of about fifty letters by about thirty authors which exhibit extreme distress; this article considers a slightly more focused subset of these which

existence of this collection of letters in MS Lansdowne 99 and the question of what to make of them raises both tantalising possibilities and knotty methodological problems for the historian.

This article uses letters from MS Lansdowne 99 to explore how a diverse group of individuals experiencing acute distress utilised religious ideas as a primary means of interpreting their experiences and expressing themselves to those in authority in Elizabethan England.[8] It argues that such letters shed important light on the progress of the English Reformation by the closing decades of the sixteenth century: its successes and failures, and insights into roads more and less travelled. But first, in the spirit of the recent 'archival turn', it is important to attempt to understand why such an extraordinary collection of material survives, and what the historian is to make of it.[9] A significant number of the letters in MS Lansdowne 99 are linked by the theme of mental and emotional distress in various ways. In nineteen cases the authors or contents are described as 'mad' by the secretariat of Lord Burghley in a variety of sixteenth-century hands. Sixteen letters are similarly annotated as 'mad' by John Strype, custodian of the Burghley papers between 1682 and 1737. In total, thirty-one authors/documents are labelled 'mad' either by the secretariat, Strype or the nineteenth-century catalogue, and a further twenty-six documents are annotated in pencil with the word 'silly' (in the sense of 'foolish') by Francis Douce, Keeper of the Manuscripts at the British Museum between 1807 and 1811.[10] By virtue of these various sets of descriptions

have extensive religious content. For a fuller discussion of the terminology and archive see my forthcoming article, '"Strange letters to the queen": distress in the Elizabethan state papers'. In brief, the term 'distress' is used here to refer in general terms to the mental and emotional response to adverse circumstances, and should not be taken to imply either modern or early modern medical or psychiatric pathologisation.

[8] On recent approaches to early modern letters see, for example, James Daybell, 'Recent studies in sixteenth-century letters', *English Literary Renaissance* xxxv/2 (2005), 135–70. In addition see James Daybell, 'Recent studies in seventeenth-century letters', *English Literary Renaissance* xxxvi/1 (2006), 331–62; Susan E. Whyman, *The pen and the people: English letter writers, 1660–1800*, Oxford 2009; James Daybell, *The material letter in early modern England: manuscript letters and the culture and practices of letter-writing, 1512–1635*, Basingstoke 2012; Leonie Hannan, *Women of letters: gender, writing and the life of the mind in early modern England*, Manchester 2016; and Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty and Karen Harvey (eds), *Letters and the body, 1700–1830: writing and embodiment*, New York 2023.

[9] See Filippo de Vivo, Andrea Guidi and Alessandro Silvestri, 'Archival transformations in early modern European history', *European History Quarterly* xlvi/3 (2016), 421–34; Alexandra Walsham, 'The social history of the archive: record-keeping in early modern Europe', *Past and Present* no. 230, supplement 11 (2016), 9–48; and Kate Peters, Alexandra Walsham and Liesbeth Corens (eds), *Archives and information in the early modern world*, Oxford 2018.

[10] OED, s.v. 'silly (adj., n., & adv.)', at <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4265967977>, sense III.6.a, accessed December 2023. On Douce see C. Hurst,

and annotations, the documents' grouping together in the archive, and in the judgements of modern historians, there are compelling reasons to treat the MS Lansdowne 99 letters as a coherent *corpus*.[11] While the grouping of the letters appears to have happened during the process of cataloguing, the decision to preserve the letters was clearly a contemporary one, and the reasons for Burghley or his secretaries to do so were manifold. In general these were letters written by individuals whose eccentric and extreme political and religious views made it worth keeping them under observation, especially for an Elizabethan state whose ministers 'hypnotised themselves with fear' over 'plots and conspiracies against the Queen'.[12]

Accepting that a significant portion of the MS Lansdowne 99 letters exhibit a thematic coherence, however, does not resolve the problem of how to label them. The colourful use of the language of insanity by Burghley's secretariat, Strype, and the printed catalogue – and echoed in more recent historical discussions of the material – certainly has an authentically early modern resonance, and these descriptors are occasionally quoted in the text to help convey the character of the archive. In the final instance, though, it is impossible – not to mention undesirable – to attempt to pathologise the mental states of these individuals writing more than four centuries ago, about whom we generally know nothing more than the internal evidence of their own letters. Attempting to 'diagnose' them, either according to a late sixteenth-, late seventeenth-, early nineteenth- or early twenty-first-century medical pathologisation would be the worst embodiment of 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.[13] As such, and as its title implies, this article approaches the letters from the perspective of the history of the emotions, and in particular through the lens of 'distress'. Focusing on distress opens up the possibility of examining a phenomenon which occupies the interstices between emotion and mental health, without getting ensnared in misguided attempts to

'Douce, Francis (1757–1834), antiquary and collector', *ODNB*, at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-7849>; and 'Francis Douce centenary number', *Bodleian Library Quarterly Record* vii/81 (1934), 359–82.

[11] In addition, of twenty-six occurrences of the words 'frantic', 'mad', 'distracted', 'crazy', 'deranged', 'insane' and 'madmen' across the entirety of the catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts, 80% of the documents are in MS Lansdowne 99, with the other six documents scattered across Lansdowne volumes 16, 17, 21, 101 and 107, no more than one or two per volume: this is a further indication that the material in MS Lansdowne 99 has been deliberately thematically grouped together. For a more in-depth discussion of the archival history and composition of MS Lansdowne 99, see my forthcoming article: '"Strange letters to the queen"'.

[12] Steven Alford, *The watchers: a secret history of the reign of Elizabeth I*, London 2013, 17–18.

[13] The famous phrase is from E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class*, London 1963, 12.

retrospectively diagnose historical subjects about whom we know so little and who sit at such a significant remove from ourselves.[14]

The question of the relationship between the English Reformation and mental and emotional distress has been relatively neglected, despite historians generally acknowledging the 'traumatic' nature of the process of religious change.[15] Scholarship on mental illness in early modern England has tended to focus either on the legal frameworks for determining intellectual competency, the medical and institutional treatment of the insane or the philosophical underpinnings and literary expression of the Renaissance condition of 'melancholy'.[16] Some authors have focused more explicitly

[14] I prefer 'mental health' to 'mental illness' as an analytical category, because the former is acknowledged as an aspect of human experience which encompasses individuals' 'emotional, psychological, and social-wellbeing' in the round, as 'determined by a complex interplay of individual, social and structural stresses and vulnerabilities'. See, for example, public statements by the World Health Organisation and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>, accessed 31 January 2024; <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>, accessed 31 January 2024.

[15] For example Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England, 1400–1580*, New Haven 2005, p. xxxiii, and Peter Marshall, *Heretics and believers: a history of the English Reformation*, New Haven 2017, p. xii. For an opposing view see Christopher Haigh, 'The taming of reformation: preachers, pastors and parishioners in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England', *History* lxxxv/280 (2000), 588. The theme is more prominent, although still largely tangential, in works on religious persecution, death, Puritanism and the suicide of Francis Spira. See, for example, Alexandra Walsham, *Catholic reformation in Protestant Britain*, Farnham 2014; Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the dead in Reformation England*, Oxford 2002; Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (eds), *The culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700*, London 1996; and M. Anne Overell, 'Recantation and retribution: "remembering Francis Spira", 1548–1638', in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (eds), *Retribution, repentance and reconciliation* (Studies in Church History xl, 2004), 159–68. Two other exceptions are Peter Marshall, 'Judgement and repentance in Tudor Manchester: the celestial journey of Ellis Hall', in Cooper and Gregory, *Retribution*, 128–37, and Walsham, '"Frantick Hacket"'.

[16] For example Richard Neugebauer, 'Medieval and early modern theories of mental illness', *Archives of General Psychiatry* xxxvi/4 (1979), 477–83, and 'Treatment of the mentally ill in medieval and early modern England: a reappraisal', *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences* xiv (1978), 158–69; Joel Peter Eigen, *Witnessing insanity: madness and mad-doctors in the English* court, London 1995; Wendy Turner, *Care and custody of the mentally ill, incompetent, and disabled in medieval England*, Turnhout 2013; Yasmin Haskell, *Diseases of the imagination and imaginary disease in the early modern period*, Turnhout 2011; Jeremy Schmidt, *Melancholy and the care of the soul: religion, moral philosophy and madness in early modern* England, Aldershot 2007; Vieda Skultans, *English madness: ideas on insanity, 1580–1890*, London 1979; German E. Berrios and Roy Porter (eds), *A history of clinical psychiatry: the origin and history of psychiatric disorders*, London 1995; Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the body: emotions and the Shakespearean stage*, Chicago 2004; Angus Gowland, 'The problem of early modern melancholy', *Past and Present* no. 191 (2006), 77–120; Mary Ann Lund, *Melancholy, medicine*

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on the religious aspects of melancholy, while others have explored the experience of madness, both from the perspectives of medical practitioners as well as through retrospective autobiographical accounts by sufferers.[17] There has also been an important historiographical discussion within Reformation studies, going back to Max Weber's notion of the 'Protestant work ethic', over the extent to which the Calvinist doctrine of predestination – and in particular the culture of English Puritanism – may have induced a pervasive culture of spiritual anxiety and depression.[18] More recent works have challenged the automatic association of predestination with despair, although there remains a lack of consensus over whether or not Calvinism might have been an aggravating factor in such cases.[19]

This article shifts the emphasis away from the causes and towards the experience and expression of distress. Through an examination of the letters of MS Lansdowne 99, it is possible to gain an understanding of the extent to and the ways in which religion shaped how distress was felt, understood and communicated. If – as neuroscientists and practitioners of neuro-history increasingly believe – the brain and its experience of emotion are constructed at least in part by the external forces of culture and history, then understanding the experience of psychological distress can significantly further our historical understanding of processes of religious change and religious identity formation in a number of important respects.[20] Religious language and ideas were one of the most common

and religion in early modern England, Cambridge 2010; and Stephanie Shirilan, *Robert Burton and the transformative powers of melancholy*, Farnham 2015.

[17] Michael MacDonald, *Mystical bedlam: madness, anxiety, and healing in seventeenth-century England*, Cambridge 1981; Hodgkin, *Madness in seventeenth-century autobiography*; Erin Sullivan, *Beyond melancholy: sadness and selfhood in renaissance England*, Oxford 2016. There has also been important historical work on Protestant emotions and religion in early modern England, for example Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*, Oxford 2013, pt 1 ('The Protestant emotions'); Alexandra Walsham, 'Deciphering divine wrath and displaying godly sorrow: providentialism and emotion in early modern England', in Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (eds), *Disaster, death and the emotions in the shadow of the apocalypse*, Basingstoke 2016, 21–44.

[18] Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, intro. Anthony Giddens, London 2001; Jean Delumeau, *Sin and fear: the emergence of a Western guilt culture, 13th–18th centuries*, New York 1990; Margo Todd, *The culture of Protestantism in early modern Scotland*, New Haven 2013; John Stachniewski, *The persecutory imagination: English Puritanism and the literature of religious despair*, Oxford 1991. In Alec Ryrie's words, 'it was Weber, above all, who created the myth of the despairing Calvinist': *Being Protestant*, 29.

[19] Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 28–9; cf. Leif Dixon, *Practical predestinarians in England, c. 1590–1640*, Farnham 2014, 26–31.

[20] Lisa Feldman Barrett, 'The theory of constructed emotion: an active inference account of interoception and categorisation', *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* xii/1 (2017), 1–23; Rob Boddice, *The history of emotions*, Manchester 2018. See also

ways through which individuals framed and understood mental and emotional distress in Elizabethan England. Decoding how they did so not only grants insight into an important aspect of the experience of mental ill health in Elizabethan England, but also acts as an instructive case study in the wider potential for religious language and ideas to shape the cultural and historical construction of mental and emotional states. Through observing a series of broad thematic associations and anomalies across the correspondence, it is also possible to come to some general observations about the contours of religious reform in Elizabethan England, including some of its more and less radical implications and trajectories. We have, in the authors of MS Lansdowne 99, a palpable and immediate sense of the aftermath of radical structural religious change, as well as the ongoing evolution of religious identities in the wake of that change. Although not a 'microhistory' in the traditional sense of the word, the intention here is to use the exceptional letters of MS Lansdowne 99 to open up areas of experience which conventional sources cannot. As Carlo Ginzburg observed of the heretical Friulian miller Menocchio, while he was 'a man somewhat different from others', his distinctiveness had limits defined by the 'flexible and invisible cage[s]' of language and culture. Furthermore, as Alexandra Walsham has argued in relation to the case of the Elizabethan pseudo-martyr William Hacket, 'if we relinquish the notion that the insane are alien outsiders whose discourse and experience diverge sharply from that of the sane, then a case can perhaps be made that "Frantick Hacket" was at least in some respects not a maverick but a man of his times'.[21] When read against the archival grain, the testimonies of MS Lansdowne 99 permit us to explore the latent possibilities of both popular religion and radical extremism in Elizabethan England.

This is not, then, an article about whether the Reformation made people mentally ill, but about the ways in which religion coloured the experience and expression of mental and emotional distress across a range of individual case studies. Religious doctrines, language and ideas acted as crucial reservoirs of meaning and expression on which sufferers drew in unique but not dissimilar ways in attempting to frame and situate themselves in their correspondence to the Elizabethan authorities. The article begins by exploring relatively conventional issues including God, sin, salvation and the supernatural; before moving on to examine prophecy and eschatology; then

Rob Boddice, 'The history of emotions: past, present, future', *Revista de Estudios Sociales* lxii (2017), 10–15, and Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, sense, experience*, Cambridge 2020.

[21] Carlo Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms: the cosmos of a sixteenth century miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, Baltimore 1992, pp. xx–xxi; Walsham, '"Frantick Hacket"', 66.

Scripture; and lastly religious conflict. In the final instance, it argues that the English Reformation significantly expanded and altered the ways in which distress was experienced and articulated by the end of the sixteenth century, offering new frameworks and resources for suffering individuals to interpret their circumstances and express their hopes and fears. These 'little Menocchios' reveal the ways in which the formal doctrinal and liturgical alterations of the English Reformation resulted in a changed landscape for a series of very personal and idiosyncratic religious journeys for individuals who were inclined to ignore the signposts and wander off the beaten track to explore the uncharted wildernesses of this new and unfamiliar world. As such, the MS Lansdowne 99 authors help us to understand the paradox of agency and influence at the heart of the process of Reformation itself: the experience of religious change left its indelible mark on the hearts and minds of the English people, altering their frames of reference and providing them with new conceptual and linguistic resources; but individuals ultimately exerted their own agency and authority over how to accept, reject, interpret and deploy those resources.

I

The MS Lansdowne 99 letters reveal much about the ubiquity and flexibility of conventional aspects of piety and religion, including the centrality of God, the nature of salvation, sorrow for sin and the activities of angels and demons. An unnamed correspondent whose letter was annotated 'fantasticall' by Burghley's secretariat wrote to the Lord Treasurer with the aim of speaking with him 'in some secret place to reveale unto youe the griefe of my troubled conscience'. He began his letter by wishing 'that after this life mortall youe maie rise and appeare before god his chosen and elect by a livelie faith in Jesus christ', a concise but theologically accurate account of justification *sola fide* perhaps intended to burnish his credentials as a godly and hence trustworthy correspondent.[22] The Irishman Roger Crimble, labelled 'distracted' by Strype and 'mad' by the Lansdowne catalogue, wrote to Queen Elizabeth explaining that 'God draweth to Queene Elizabeth but those that are electid and Chosen of him', deploying the language of justification by faith alone in a looser and more metaphorical fashion as evidence of his faithfulness and deservingness of aid.[23] William Renolds, described as 'distracted' by Burghley's secretaries, Strype and the Lansdowne catalogue, explained in relation to his extensive and deeply-felt spiritual torments that 'where there is noe Temptacion,

[22] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 30, fo. 79r.

[23] *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 190; MS Lansdowne 99, no. 17, fo. 46r. For more context on Crimble see Willis, '"Strange letters to the queen"'.

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There is no trial of Faythe, For god will trie his chosen and his ellecte as gold and silver is seven tymes tried & purified in the fier'. Renolds sought both to rationalise his earthly tribulations with the promise of heavenly rewards, and also to tap into a common valency between alchemical purification and Reformed soteriology.[24] Across these letters, the language of election served a multiplicity of functions: as a way of praising the godliness of the recipient of the letter, a way of articulating the worthiness of the author, and a way of rationalising personal misfortune and suffering. For these distressed individuals, writing to the government to beg favours and seek relief, the Reformed language of salvation was a natural and powerful rhetorical resource for both rationalising and vocalising their predicaments and their deservingness of aid.[25] More conservative (and sometimes confused) soteriologies were also on display, such as that of William Derbishere, who wrote to Burghley in 1588 offering his services 'for the keeping of lies or writings not fit to be knowen by any others'. Derbishere explained that he had undergone many trials to demonstrate his loyalty to the earl of Leicester, 'which trial I have brought with so great aprice as god shall save my soule at the latter day', an unconscious example of the stubborn persistence of the idea of works-righteousness.[26] Similarly the condemned Catholic priest Thomas Woodhouse, whom (his biographer notes) many thought 'mad', instructed Burghley that reconciling Elizabeth to papal supremacy would 'redounde unto your eternall salvacion, honor and glorye'; to refuse to do so would lead to 'the utter subversion and perishing of you and yours for ever in hell where ys the knawynge worme, where ys the unquynchable fyre, where is weaping and knashinge of teacthe'.[27] Unsurprisingly, Woodhouse's comments reflected a

[24] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 19, fos 51r–v. William Tyndale had similarly noted that 'we must needs be baptised in tribulations': 'The obedience of a Christian man', in his *Doctrinal treatises and introductions to different portions of holy Scriptures*, ed. Henry Walter, Cambridge 1848, 140. On alchemy see Zoe Screti, 'The relationship between religious reform and alchemy in England, *c.*1450–1650', unpubl. PhD diss. Birmingham 2023.

[25] For very different letters which performed similar functions see Steven King, *Writing the lives of the English poor, 1750s–1830s*, London 2019; *Essex pauper letters, 1731–1837*, ed. Thomas Sokoll, Oxford 2001; Thomas Sokoll, 'Negotiating a living: Essex pauper letters from London, 1800–1834', *International Review of Social History* xlv (2000), 19–46; Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Olwen Purdue, '"Please pardon me for taking the liberty": poverty letters as negotiating spaces in 1920s and 1930s Belfast and Dublin', *Cultural and Social History* xix/2 (2022), 1–19.

[26] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 7, fo. 14r. On 'countrie divinitie' see, for example, Christopher Haigh, *The plain man's pathways to heaven: kinds of Christianity in post-Reformation England*, Oxford 2007, chs iii–iv; and Alexandra Walsham, 'The parochial roots of Laudianism revisited: Catholics, anti-Calvinists and "parish Anglicans" in early Stuart England', this JOURNAL xlix/4 (1998), 620–51.

[27] Thomas M. McCoog, 'Woodhouse, Thomas (d. 1573), Jesuit and martyr', *ODNB*, at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-29927>; MS Lansdowne 99, no. 1, fo. 1r.

detailed and evocative Catholic pen portrait of the afterlife; of rewards for good works and corresponding punishments for sinful ones.[28] Robert Bushel, who Burghley's secretary noted 'semes to be disempered', explained that 'the living god … hath preferred me … & hath kept me hitherto as a member of Jesus Christ & I hope he will do to the end of my life', demonstrating unambiguous Christocentrism while also showing rhetorical ambivalence about the Calvinist notion of the perseverance of the saints, perhaps to temper any appearance of overconfidence with humility.[29] John Castle, who styled himself a 'Christian Vintner' and was labelled crazy by the Lansdowne catalogue, expressed Presbyterian ecclesiological sentiments in a 'cantyccle' sent to Elizabeth around 1594, but sacrificed soteriological precision for literary effect when he entreated her for Christ's sake to 'stryve for his truth, & blessead shalt thou bee'.[30] For those *in extremis*, salvation was one of the most potent tools of argument and persuasion, but theological accuracy might be rendered subordinate to rhetorical utility or emotional impact.

The distress of the authors of the MS Lansdowne 99 letters in response to their wretched circumstances frequently resulted in meditations on the nature and role of sin. Robert Banister, described by Strype as 'a Religious Mad-man', appears through the internal evidence of his two letters of 1578 to Queen Elizabeth I to have been an antinomian and possibly a member of the Family of Love. In his missives he railed against his Puritan opponents, who made it 'daungerys to be talked of … the light of the free pardon of our manyfolde sinnes'. The godly, who 'by ther sarvys … hope to win gods love', failed to recognise 'that all sinnes is forgiven them, as ther sinnes past, present, & to be don'.[31] Antinomians frequently characterised Puritanism as a new form of works-righteousness, stressing instead their freedom from God's law, and therefore also sin. In contrast, during one of his early prophetic calls for the reformation of the moral and spiritual life of the nation, William Renolds called upon England 'to turne to god and godlynes, Then … the darke and glummy clowdes of thy hart shalbegin to breake, and the sky wax clear to thy seyght even god his word which to thy worldly understanding thrugh the

[28] On confessional differences regarding the nature of hell see Peter Marshall, 'The reformation of hell? Protestant and Catholic infernalism in England *c.* 1560–1640', this JOURNAL lxi/2 (2010), 279–98.

[29] *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 190; MS Lansdowne 99, no. 18, fo. 50r.

[30] *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 191; MS Lansdowne 99, no. 26, fos 70r–74v.

[31] *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 190; MS Lansdowne 99, no. 4, fos 8r–9r. For a fuller analysis of Banister's unconventional religious beliefs see Jonathan Willis, *The reformation of the Decalogue: religious identity and the Ten Commandments in England, c.1485–1625*, Cambridge 2017, 204–6. On Familism see Christopher Marsh, *The Family of Love in English society, 1550–1630*, Cambridge 2005.

clowdes of thy karnole concupesense; semes darke and uncomfertable'.[32] This emphasis on the persistence of concupiscence was a distinctively Protestant one.[33] In a later letter to the queen, Renolds described himself as 'but a lumpe of claye wrapped full of synne & misserie, & there restithe noe goodness in me', appealing to Elizabeth, 'Be you Marcie for I am mysserie'.[34] In a copy of a letter which may have been one of those he claimed to have scattered publicly in the streets of London, Renolds spoke in considerable detail of a conspiracy by powerful enemies to draw him into sin, 'whereby they hopid to take my soule by deseaving my senses with the pleasure & tast of wine, and behoulding wemenes vane bewtie'. The notion that Catholics in particular sought to bring about spiritual destruction in others through appeals to sensual pleasure was common, and through this language Renolds both reinforced anti-Catholic stereotypes as well as burnishing his own godly credentials.[35] When William Doddington committed suicide by jumping from the spire of St Sepulchre's church in Holborn in 1600, the letter attached to his neck referenced the men whose 'bad meanes' had brought him to such an end: 'God forgive it them, and I do, And o Lord forgive me this cruell fact uppon myne owne body, which I utterly detest, and moste humble pray him to Cast it behind him, and that of his exceding and infinite mercye he will forgive it me with all my other synnes.'[36] Burghley's secretariat labelled the letter 'A lamentable ejaculation of William Doddington's distressed soule'. While popular and legal attitudes to suicide remained condemnatory, Elizabeth Hunter has argued that the theology of double predestination may have weakened the association of suicide with damnation in post-Reformation England.[37] Signing off, 'the unhappy William doddington thelder' wrote of his trust 'in the only passion & merittes of Jhesus Christ', ending 'Confessing my

[32] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 10, fo. 26r–v.

[33] Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, ch. iii.

[34] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 19, fo. 51r.

[35] Ibid. no. 31, fo. 85r. For further examples of this trope see Alexandra Walsham, 'The pope's merchandise and the Jesuits' trumpery: Catholic relics and Protestant polemic in post-Reformation England', in Jennifer Spinks and Dagmar Eichberger (eds), *Religion, the supernatural, and visual culture in early modern Europe: an album amicorum for Charles Zika*, Leiden 2015, 370–409; Jonathan Willis, *Church music and Protestantism in post-Reformation England: discourses, sites, and identities*, Farnham 2010, 50–1.

[36] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 32, fo. 88r; Charles Angell Bradford, 'William Dodington: a tragedy of St. Sepulchre's, Holborn, in 1600', *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* n.s. vii (1933), 124–32.

[37] Elizabeth K. Hunter, '"Between the bridge and the brook": suicide and salvation in England, *c.*1550–1650', *Reformation and Renaissance Review* xv/3 (2013), 253. See also Michael MacDonald, 'The secularisation of suicide in England, 1660–1800', *Past and Present* no. 111 (1986), 50–100; Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless souls: suicide in early modern England*, Oxford 1990.

exceeding greate synnes I say Jhesu master have mercy on me.' The authors of the MS Lansdowne 99 letters were particularly preoccupied by sin: most often their own, but frequently also the sins of others. Sin was one of the great constants of the Christian life both before and after the Reformation, albeit in very different ways, and in these letters functioned as a conduit for reflecting both on soteriology and also morality. It was consequently a natural focus for interrogating reality in search of meaning in times of mental and emotional turmoil.[38] While enumerating the sins of others was an easy way to paint them in a negative light, meditation on one's own sins could, paradoxically, have a more positive theological function. For the letters' authors and their recipients, humble meditation on sin was a sign of the spirit of repentance, which orthodox Calvinism presented as a primary mechanism for driving individuals away from trust in their own works and towards faith in Christ and the promises of the Gospel.[39]

The letters of MS Lansdowne 99 are also supernaturally supercharged. Historians generally recognise that, far from a 'disenchantment of the world', the Protestant Reformations ushered in a period of heightened awareness and anxiety over witches, ghosts, demons and the like. This was at least in part a consequence of the degree to which Protestantism formally denied the power of human agency (beyond prayer) to defend against supernatural forces.[40] Angels and devils were thus integral and active components of the worldviews of the MS Lansdowne 99 authors. When the enterprising William Hobby wrote to Burghley in 1589, it was with the offer to clear Skenfrith Castle in Montgomeryshire of 'a dyvell and his Dame', who sat there upon hogsheads of gold and silver. His condition for removing these demonic squatters 'by the grace of god without any charge to the Quene and your lordshippe' was official permission to retain their treasure.[41] Likewise, a man named Robert Saunderson wrote to Burghley's secretary, Sir Michael Hicks, to allow his former servant, 'some crazy person' in the assessment of the Lansdowne catalogue, 'to remove a broode of Dyvells'. This was not an offer Saunderson felt

[38] On this theme see, for example, Jonathan Willis (ed.), *Sin and salvation in Reformation England*, Farnham 2015.

[39] On repentance see idem, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, 179–85.

[40] Weber, *The Protestant ethic*; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic*, London 1997; Robert W. Scribner, 'The Reformation, popular magic and the "disenchantment of the world"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* xxiii (1993), 475–94; Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and "the disenchantment of the world" reassessed', *HJ* li/2 (2008), 497–528.

[41] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 11, fo. 27r. Local legends persist that 'beneath Skenfrith Castle there is buried treasure and that on nights when there is a full moon, the devil dances there with his dame'. See the 'Black habits black deeds walk' offered by The Bell at Skenfrith: at <https://www.thebellatskenfrith.co.uk/walks–activities>; <https://www.thebellatskenfrith.co.uk/downloads/THE%20BLACK%20HABITS%20WALK.pdf>, both accessed 4 August 2023.

Burghley could refuse, for 'the Dyvell take him that wold not be rydd of such neybours'.[42] Anthony Greene, labelled 'distracted' by Burghley's secretariat, was a Fellow of Pembroke College whose incarceration in the notorious Bethlehem hospital ('Bedlam') cost the college twenty nobles a year. In his undated letter he explained that his memory had 'ben weakened by tormenting by devils' – Greene stands out as one of the few Lansdowne authors to actually attribute his distress to supernatural antagonists.[43]

In a sentiment with which most loyal Protestants would surely have agreed, Roger Crimble interpreted the obligation of Elizabeth's subjects to battle against her enemies from a cosmic perspective, as 'Soldiors, bound to feight under the Banner of Christ against the great Captain our enemi the dyvill, against the Pope his leuetenant, and the kinge of spayne his standert bearer'.[44] Internalising his demons, William Renolds characterised his reliance on Elizabeth and his concern for his condition as 'feringe, for the lacke of your graces good helpe, that in this vale of myss-erie and wilde wilderness, I be not overcome with the roringe lion, I meane the divell the fleshe and this wicked worlde', the devil functioning as a synecdoche for the broader cesspit of human temptation, sin and concupiscence.[45] Turning to more welcome apparitions, Miles Fry, labelled 'distempered' by Strype and 'a madman' by the Lansdowne catalogue, claimed in a letter of 1587 to be the illegitimate son of God and Queen Elizabeth. He went on to describe how he had been taken at birth by none other than the angel Gabriel to be raised by a Devonshire couple, Joan and John Fry.[46] Fry was clear that 'my authoriti is greater than gabriels: I am the soone his is but a servant'.[47] The Mansfield-dwelling glover Robert Dickons, described as 'fond' (i.e. foolish) by Burghley's secretariat and 'distracted' by Strype, wrote to the queen in February 1589. Dickons had previously claimed to have been visited by an angel, although when questioned by the 'silver-tongued' preacher Henry Smith in 1582 he confessed that his vision had been confected. Under duress he described

[42] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 27, fo. 75r.

[43] *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 191. Patricia Allderidge, 'Management and mismanagement at Bedlam, 1547–1633', in Charles Webster (ed.), *Health, medicine and mortality in the sixteenth century*, Cambridge 1979, 153; MS Lansdowne 99, no. 29, fo. 78r–v; cf. Nehemiah Wallington's frequent encounters with Satan: *The notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618–1654: a selection*, ed. David Booy, London 2007, 92–100, 171–180.

[44] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 17, fo. 46r. This was more or less the same cast as represented in the controversial early seventeenth-century satirical anti-Catholic print 'The double deliverance 1588 1605', produced in 1621 by Samuel Ward: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1847-0723-11>, accessed 9 April 2024.

[45] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 19, fo. 22r.

[46] *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 190.

[47] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 6, fo. 13r.

how, after having been alone in the shop and startled by a light, 'whereat I was astonished, and imagining with my selfe what it shoulde meane, it came into my head to tell my fellowes which came in and found mee afraide, that I had seene an Angell in a flame of fire'.[48] Under the pressure of examination Dickons may have explained the angel away as a figment of his imagination, but it is nevertheless telling that it initially became a means for him to frame a longer history of 'sights and dreames' in order to make him seem 'strange unto men'.[49] In an age where the philosopher and alchemist John Dee exerted considerable influence over the queen herself, perhaps Dickons felt that his own 'conversations with angels' would grant him a speck of the same power, authority and credibility.[50]

II

Many of the troubled souls of MS Lansdowne 99 ranged beyond their own individual sinfulness and salvation, and their personal encounters with angels and demons, to meditate more widely on themes of prophecy, providence and eschatology. To engage with these themes was categorically not the preserve of those experiencing mental or emotional distress. As Alexandra Walsham has demonstrated, 'providentialism was not a marginal feature of the religious culture of early modern England, but part of the mainstream, a cluster of presuppositions which enjoyed near universal acceptance'.[51] As such, it is therefore unsurprising that providence, prophecy and millenarian ideas provided a powerful and ready source of language and meaning through which the experience of distress could be expressed. Roger Edwardes – described as 'a religious madman' by Strype, and whose apocalyptic beliefs have been explored in detail by Stephen Clucas – wrote two letters to Burghley in May 1579.[52] In the first of these, he divulged that 'the lorde hath made mee absolute stuarde over his olde hyden Tresore which no man dorst touch till this daye: and hee and not I doth governe the distribution of them: you must thearefore deale wisely with all: for they ar mingled with a devowring

[48] Ibid. no. 9, fo. 18r; Henry Smith, *Three sermons made by maister Henry Smith*, I:. *The benefit of contentation*, II:*The affinitie of the faithfull*; III: *The lost sheepe is found*, London 1599 (*RSTC* 22735), sig. E3r.

[49] On angels in the English reformation see Laura Sangha, *Angels and belief in England, 1480–1700*, London 2012, and Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham (eds), *Angels in the early modern world*, Cambridge 2006.

[50] On Dee see, for example, Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee's conversations with angels: cabala, alchemy and the end of nature*, Cambridge 1999.

[51] Walsham, *Providence*, 2; cf. Tessa Watt, *Cheap print and popular piety, 1550–1640*, Cambridge 1996.

[52] Clucas, '"This paradoxall restitution iudaicall"', 512.

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flame'.[53] Religious prophecy and the threat of judgement were natural themes for the distressed to manipulate in order to demonstrate knowledge, worth and power, as well as to leverage favour. Similarly, Miles Fry threatened that if he did not receive aid from his royal 'mother', Queen Elizabeth, he would return to Devon, end his life 'and then wil god punish this land'.[54] Invocations of divine power offered an attractive rhetorical substitute for desperate individuals lacking any influence of their own.

In his short letter to Elizabeth, Robert Dickons presented himself as a 'poure orator … commanded by the worde of God to crye Repentance and to disclose Antechriste'.[55] Repentance was a key concept in both the theology and culture of English Protestantism, encompassing individual sorrow for sin as part of justification and the ongoing process of sanctification as well as the conviction that communal penance and prayer could protect sinful communities from God's temporal chastisements.[56] Dickons claimed God had declared that Antichrist would soon be made manifest and his people overthrown, and that he would 'smite the earthe with all plages with famine swoord and pestelens'. God had warned Dickons that 'if thou forwarne not the people to Repentance before plages come theire sinnes be upon thy head'. The fact that he was being obstructed by the Elizabethan authorities led him to 'calle heaven and earthe to record that God and all his creaturs wilbe witness agasinste you that I am redie at all tymes to move you to Repentance and they esteeme not my wordes'. This was no way to talk to a queen, especially one as protective of her status and prerogative as Elizabeth, but Dickons beseeched 'your majestie to beare with my bouldnes in writing for I cannot with drawe my selfe to doe the things that God hathe commanded me to doe'. Across post-Reformation society and culture, the overriding imperative to demonstrate obedience to God could be interpreted as an implicit licence to push at the boundaries of conventional respect for and obedience to temporal authority.[57]

William Paget[58] similarly wrote to Burghley in September 1583 'to sustayne the Charge god hath Caled me unto', begging him 'to thynck it

[53] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 3, fo. 6r.

[54] Ibid. no. 7, fo. 13r.

[55] Ibid. no. 9, fo. 18r.

[56] See Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, 179–85, and Walsham, *Providence*, 150–6.

[57] More usually discussed in the context of (for example) rebellion and religious disobedience/nonconformity, it could clearly serve a more instrumental purpose at times.

[58] The date of his letter means that he cannot have been the famous William, first Baron Paget, who died in 1563, or his eponymous grandson, the fourth Baron, who was born in 1572. He could have been the William Paget who matriculated from Trinity College, Cambridge in 1577/8 or the William Paget who made a will in 1589, but his identity is uncertain: <https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search–2018.pl?

not to proceed of a vayne and flying Cogitation, that I had Iudgment above others that I woold define absolutly of gods woorkes'.[59] Paget claimed multiple times to have seen fiery portents in the skies, such as when riding between Antwerp and Paris 'the yere after the great plage', after which there followed 'gret murders and troobles, as is not unknowen'. Rather than repentance, Paget preached vigilance, remarking that England's enemies 'ryse not because we Lyve Synfully … but ther determination is to put doune our Lawfull Prynce to sett up the man of Synne'.[60] Like Paget, John Castle wrote to Elizabeth with a more positive message of God's providential protection of his chosen people and their ruler in the form of a rhyming canticle, mimicking the genre of scriptural songs and hymns used in Book of Common Prayer services. He inveighed against pleasure, profit, flattery, riches, usury, mockery and tyranny, but reassured Elizabeth:

> *Though all the nacions in the worlde agaynste thee do conspire*
> *yf thou obey his holye will hele make them all retyre*
> *yea cursead shall that kyngdome bee, that dooth agaynste thee ryse*
> *for wofull plages hele throw on them, wich doo thie hurt devyse.*

Castle would go on to tread shakier ground, and to some extent his early praise of Elizabeth can be seen as fulfilling the twin rhetorical functions of preparing the way for a more controversial critique of aspects of Elizabethan religious policy, and of prescribing the virtue he wanted Elizabeth to aspire to rather than appraising that which she already possessed.[61] Nevertheless, the ubiquity and flexibility of the discourse of providence allowed him to do both while also articulating an ostensibly loyal and patriotic sentiment.

The most extended occurrence of such themes within the Lansdowne letters appears in the voluminous correspondence of William Renolds, with whom this article began. In his first surviving letter, he alluded to an earlier lost missive in which 'I did declare the thretninges of God … to come upon London shortly for owre sinnes', thoughts 'which I conseavid like fire in the Soft partes which cast me into a slepe'.[62] In this letter, penned in January 1589, less than six months after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, maritime matters and naval threats were clearly still matters of significant concern. Renolds described 'running into the sea

sur=&suro=w&fir=&firo=c&cit=&cito=c&c=all&z=all&tex=PGT577W&sye=&eye=&col=all&maxcount=50>, accessed 8 August 2023; The National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/76/9.

[59] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 36, fo. 94r.

[60] Ibid. fos 94r–95r.

[61] A similar rhetorical strategy to that described by Alexandra Walsham, '"A very Deborah?" The myth of Elizabeth I as a providential monarch', in Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (eds), *The myth of Elizabeth*, Basingstoke 2003, 143–68.

[62] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 10, fo. 22r.

to fetch sir francis Drakes', as well as a 'fire so fearse in the East' and 'the Enemyes who will enter in the East and spred up to London'. In another of his early letters, Renolds explained that 'it hath pleased god now onse agane to move me to wryght to you, an Inferyor persone, that which he hath sense in mersey showed me, even the Joyfullest tydinges that ever was for England, which is now my thirde a larume to awaken England and the swetest melody that ever England herd'.[63] Although it gained even greater currency in the seventeenth century, during the reign of Elizabeth the rhetorical conceit of a preacher or author raising an 'alarm' to warn complacent subjects of their sinful behaviour and the need to amend their ways was already a common providential trope.[64]

In a later letter he claimed to have distributed publicly in many copies throughout Elizabethan London, Renolds alluded to a whole series of

> dreames & visions, as that of my chield & young sonne I have whoes eyes I sawe like flames of fire, Also of my smighting the great serpent uppon his hed … Also the stryfe betwixt my mother and her neigbore for a hedge of Roses … and many more such like which her maiestie knue of before I scatterid my letters in your streates.[65]

Renolds apparently first wrote to Elizabeth at the age of 30 – (perhaps) coincidentally the same age as Jesus when he began his ministry – and recalled that 'this 7 [y]eares I have written & sent them above 200 letters'.[66] Over the course of his epistles preserved in the State Papers, Renolds became increasingly frustrated, paranoid and distressed, angrily consumed in relating the traumatic twists and turns of his life story. Providence and prophecy were themes to which he continually returned. Towards the end of his public letter, Renolds threatened 'perrels to the people, If they my enemyes and adversaris do this still defer & delay me in my sute'. He also observed that 'god has begune to decrease his plagues & grievous sicnese in and abowte London' and expressed how he was 'trwly thanckfull' that by continuing amendment of life God 'may altogether remove them from you'. He warned of the dangers of waning zeal and indifference in Londoners' self-improvement, explaining that 'the worde is so common that your long use therein makes you lothe it, or else to feele no sweetnese therein', recommending instead 'a zealus devocion to god, to feede your soules with the bread of lyfe, and to

[63] Ibid. fo. 25r.

[64] For example, John Phillips, *A frendly larum: or, Faythfull warnynge to the true harted subiectes of England discoueryng the actes, and malicious myndes of those obstinate and rebellious papists that hope (as they terme it) to haue theyr golden day*, London 1570 (*RSTC* 19870), and Robert Gray, *An alarum to England sounding the most fearefull and terrible example of Gods vengeance, that euer was inflicted in this world vpon mankind for sinne: seruing generally as a warning for all people to eschew sinne, lest they partake of the like vengeance*, London 1609 (*RSTC* 12203).

[65] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 31, fo. 86r.

[66] Ibid. fo. 85r.

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replenishe your hartes with godly love & heavenly grases'.[67] He also railed against the wicked, as a result of whose lack of charity many innocent men, women and children had perished. He denounced such 'Doges', 'monsters', 'villanes', 'develes and damned sperites, voyde of hewmanitie and natulrall compaseon, hardened in sine and wholy resoleute to dwell in your crueltie', warning them (in the quotation seen at the start of this article) that unless they chose to mend their ways God would visit terrible retribution on them. William Renolds was only the most extreme example of a much broader tendency of the distressed to interpret personal misfortune in cosmic terms and to attempt to leverage divine authority, providence and prophecy as narrative and rhetorical tools for constructing and communicating their own power, authority, godliness and deservingness.

III

In 1638 William Chillingworth – religious controversialist and godson of Archbishop Laud – famously wrote 'The BIBLE. The BIBLE, I say, The BIBLE only is the Religion of Protestants!'[68] By this, Chillingworth was referencing the Protestant belief in the sufficiency of Scripture for salvation.[69] In recent decades, the centrality of the Bible to English Protestant religious practice, thought and identity has received a tremendous amount of scholarly attention: from biblical translation and publication through to social status, gender and visual and material cultures.[70] Of particular relevance here is Kate Narveson's identification of the development of 'a lively culture of lay people's writing "in divinity"', or '"in Scripture phrase"'.[71] The MS Lansdowne 99 authors exhibited engagement with Scripture in a number of different ways, providing compelling evidence of the social

[67] Ibid. fo. 87v.

[68] William Chillingworth, *The religion of Protestants a safe way to salvation*, Oxford 1638 (*RSTC* 5138), 375.

[69] Cf. Patrick Collinson, *The religion of Protestants: the Church in English society, 1559–1625*, Oxford 1984, pp. vii–x.

[70] For example Debora K. Shuger, *Paratexts of the English Bible, 1525–1611*, Oxford 2022; Kevin Killeen, *The political Bible in early modern England*, Cambridge 2017; Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith and Rachel Willie (eds), *The Oxford handbook of the Bible in early modern England, c. 1530–1700*, Oxford 2015; Femke Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in early modern England: religious reading and writing*, Oxford 2013; Eyal Poleg, *Approaching the Bible in medieval England*, Manchester 2013; Naomi Tadmor, *The social universe of the English Bible: Scripture, society and culture in early modern England*, Cambridge 2010; Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'godly' household: religious art in post-Reformation Britain*, New Haven 2010; and Susan Frye, *Pens and needles: women's textualities in early modern England*, Philadelphia, PA 2010.

[71] Kate Narveson, *Bible readers and lay writers in early modern England: gender and self-definition in an emerging writing culture*, Abingdon 2016, 1–4.

and cultural pervasiveness of biblical language, knowledge and engagement by the second half of the reign of Elizabeth. Narveson has noted that lay people brought practices from the broader culture of reading to Scripture, such as note-taking, commonplacing and collation.[72] Accordingly, in his 1579 letters to Cecil, Roger Edwardes explained: 'I have collected the cheef places of the prophete, and geevene some opening upon the same, in the shortest maner that I coulde.'[73] It is one of the central arguments of this article that while it might be easy to assume that letters written from a place of extreme distress would be irrational, chaotic or disorganised, the MS Lansdowne 99 authors frequently took great pains to explain the logic behind their extreme claims, participating fully in the biblical culture of post-Reformation England and providing painstaking evidence, often literally chapter and verse. Only one other MS Lansdowne 99 author commented explicitly on the manner of his engagement with Scripture. Comparing the majesty and mercy of Elizabeth to that of God, Roger Crimble explained that 'as we reade in scripture his people were afraide to speak with [him] … yet his mercifull kyndnes is so much shewed unto mankind as he wold be spoken to'.[74] Later in the same letter he introduced further evidence from Scripture with the phrase 'as I find writtin in the Old Testament'.[75] It appears to have been significant for Crimble to underscore that his biblical knowledge came from a first-hand experience of reading the written text, rather than hearing the word read or preached, possibly as a way of emphasising his religious knowledge and education, and therefore his credibility and trustworthiness.

Some of the MS Lansdowne 99 authors referenced Scripture by including brief 'chapter and verse' citations interspersed in the text of their letters without including actual quotations. When Robert Dickons wrote to the queen to express concern about God's providential punishment of the wicked, he listed a series of scriptural references in the left-hand margin: Malachi iv.6, Ezekiel xxxiii.3, Deuteronomy xxx.12, Joshua xxii.21, Luke xix.40, Matthew xxiii.37 and Ephesians v.6.[76] This biblical paratext, containing references from both the Old and New Testaments, provided an implicit scriptural commentary on the central part of his letter, expanding on his primary themes of prophecy and judgement.[77] The *mis en page* of marginal scriptural references was common in printed texts, and this

[72] Ibid. 29–30. [73] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 3, fo. 6r. [74] Ibid. no. 17, fo. 45r.
[75] Ibid, fo. 45v. [76] Ibid.
[77] Ezekiel xxxiii.3 reads: 'If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people'; Matthew xxiii.37 reads: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!' (KJV).

may be another example of the influence of print culture on manuscript presentation, such as that highlighted by Andrew Cambers in relation to godly diaries and memoirs, spilling out into epistolary culture.[78] The inclusion of both Old and New Testament quotations to reinforce the same point was a common Protestant hermeneutic device which emphasised the essential harmony and continuity of God's message and will across both Law and Gospel.[79]

More common in the MS Lansdowne 99 letters were scriptural references accompanying quotations or paraphrases of a biblical text. In one of a series of letters sent in 1592 from the Fleet prison by William and Thomas Barlee, characterised as 'strange' by Strype and 'apparently insane' by the Lansdowne catalogue, and addressed to the Court of Star Chamber 'for redress of wrongs received from their merciless creditors', the father and son authors ended with reference to 'suche (Roiall) mercie: As (loving) Eliseus Earnestlie Craves: (of oure kynge, of Israell:) for hys, (moste Cruell) persecutors. 4 kings. 6. 20. 21. 22'.[80] 2 Kings vi.20–2 (as more commonly referenced in the Protestant canon) recounts how the prophet Elisha instructed the king of Israel not to kill a group of Aramean prisoners who had been sent to capture him, but rather to treat them with mercy and grant them food and drink. As such, Barlee sought to provide a biblical precedent for the mercy he requested from the justices in Star Chamber. Discussion of the figure of Eliseus/Elisha betrayed an advanced level of scriptural literacy, suggesting an intimate familiarity with the biblical text, and a desire to demonstrate the same.[81] The following figures are rough and ready, but indicative: full-text searches on Early English Books Online reveal 1,624 publications mentioning the biblical A-lister Moses in the period 1558–1603, 496 mentioning Noah, but only 212 mentioning Elisha (144) or Eliseus (108).[82] Focusing on one key text, the Elizabethan Homilies mention Moses 32 times, Noah 10 times and Elisha/Eliseus not once.[83] William Renolds was another author to

[78] Andrew Cambers, 'Reading, the godly, and self-writing in England, *circa* 1580–1720', *Journal of British Studies* xlvi/4 (2007), 808–10. These kinds of *marginalia* were ubiquitous, but see (for example) *Certayne sermons appointed by the quenes maiestie to be declared and read, by all persones, vycars, and curates, every Sonday and holy daye, in theyr churches*, London 1559 (*RSTC* 13648), passim, esp. sigs Cir–Civv.

[79] See, for example, Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, 20–2.

[80] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 16, fo. 39r. In the Catholic manner of numbering the books of the Bible, 1 and 2 Samuel are 1 and 2 Kings, so the Protestant 1 and 2 Kings were numbered 3 and 4 Kings in the Catholic canon.

[81] Peter Marshall has noted in relation to the case of Ellis Hall a similar example of 'scriptural "self-fashioning"' and relatively obscure biblical knowledge: 'The celestial journey of Ellis Hall', 136–7.

[82] <https://www.proquest.com/eebo?accountid=8630>, accessed 27 February 2024.

[83] Church of England, *Sermons, or homilies, appointed to be read in churches, in the time of Queen Elizabeth, of famous memory*, Dublin 1821.

pepper his letters with chapter and verse quotations and references, for example: '22.Iere.3. thuse saeth the lord exsequte ye Iudgement & righteousnes and deliver the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor, and vexe not the stranger, the fatherlese nor the widowe, doe no violence, nor shed Innosent blud in this plase'.[84] While some of the MS Lansdowne 99 authors displayed levels of scriptural knowledge beyond that of the average conformist churchgoer, they did so in rough proportion with the number of scriptural enthusiasts in wider society. Their distress and their audience helped to shape their choice of biblical episodes and evidence, but overall their engagement with the wider world of scriptural interpretation and invocation displays striking continuities with the broader culture of Protestant biblicism.

In one of the more unusual scriptural engagements in MS Lansdowne 99, William Barlee used scriptural paraphrase as a way of reflecting on and interpreting his own mental and emotional distress. Referring to unspecified earlier writings, he wrote

> lett yt now please yowre honor, to forgett those tryfles: and to Redeliver them, soo as I maye knytt them uppe, in A bagge of oblivion: for (in truthe) they proceded from my trobled mynde, even as beloved davides madde toyes, Issued from hym, whiles (by godes providence) he was caste into hys enemies hands: (de quo, fit mentio, verse.13.ca.21.of.1.kinges).[85]

David's madness before Achish, king of Gath, as described in 1 Samuel xxi, was feigned: a tactic to avoid harm and escape from the Philistine monarch. The precedent of the great biblical king's temporary 'madness', however, allowed Barlee to frame his own distress in positive terms in relation to one of the most prominent Old Testament figures, the author of the Psalms and ancestor of Christ. Roger Crimble also drew scriptural parallels between his own experience and the biblical story of Noah, although he did so without scriptural citation. Just as 'god made no Covenant with Noj untill he drewe him into the arcke', Crimble wrote, 'now that god hath brought all my name and nation into tharcke, under me in one howsholde, as all myne, no doupt it is the will of God that I shall make a Covenant with him'.[86] The extent to which individuals in post-Reformation England might come to personally identify with key figures and episodes from Scripture is an underexplored area, although will not remain so for

[84] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 31, fo. 81v. Renolds's wording is much closer to the Geneva translation than the Bishops' Bible, although overall the Lansdowne authors drew on a range of different contemporary biblical translations and numbering systems in their letters.

[85] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 45, fo. 135v. 1 Sam. xxi.13 reads: 'And he changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard.'

[86] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 17, fo. 45v.

long.[87] Elsewhere, Roger Crimble referred to 'manie profittes' from the Bible, including Moses, Joshua, Solomon and Christ himself. He also incorporated biblical language from the Gospels and Psalms into his letter, again without citation.[88] Unacknowledged biblical quotation and paraphrase was the most common way the Lansdowne authors engaged with Scripture in their letters, hinting at the extraordinary extent to which in a very short time biblical phrases and ideas came to suffuse early modern culture. Writing shortly after midsummer 1596, the foreign prisoner Amyas, labelled 'crazy' by the Lansdowne catalogue, wrote to plead for 'death or liberty' from 'the Magestrates or hycher Power' in language reminiscent of Romans xiii.1.[89] Likewise, an unnamed supplicant writing to Lord Burghley, whose undated letter was marked 'fantasticall' by Burghley's secretaries, adopted the language of 2 Timothy i.2 in his salutation: 'Grace mercy and peace be with your honour from god the father even through our lord Jesus Christe.'[90] It is much less surprising to find the letter sent from the Tower by the imprisoned Puritan minister William Hubbock, described as 'canting' by the Lansdowne catalogue, peppered with unacknowledged references to Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. Hubbock flatteringly compared Cecil in his wisdom 'even as it was sayd to David: as an Aungel of god: whom above all others I wold to god might be judge of my peaceble behaviour in the ministerie'.[91] But most of the Lansdowne authors appear to have been laymen, albeit in many cases possessed of an above-average degree of religious knowledge and enthusiasm.[92] Certain biblical figures or episodes featured more prominently across the letters in the sample, including David, Joseph, Moses, Samson, Adam, Solomon and of course Christ, giving an insight into the identities of some of the most commonly embraced biblical characters. Those in distress appear to have identified with a select cast of patriarchs and holy men (and interestingly both the letters' authors and the biblical figures mentioned were all men) whose characteristics and stories they mobilised on their

[87] I am grateful to Laura Sangha for conversations about her unpublished research on this subject; Christopher Marsh is also doing work in this area.

[88] For example, Luke xvii.19; Matt. xv.28; Matt. xxv.34; Mark xii.41–4; Psalm xxi.2.

[89] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 56, fo. 155r; *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 191. Romans xiii.1 reads 'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.' On the significance of Romans xiii in the English Reformation see Steven Foster, 'The reception of Romans 13:1–7 during the English Reformation', unpubl. PhD diss. Leeds 2017.

[90] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 30, fo. 79r. 2 Tim i.2 reads: 'To Timothy, my dearly beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord' (KJV).

[91] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 23, fo. 60r. See also Ecclesiastes vii.23; Proverbs xix.11; Proverbs xvi.15.

[92] Based on the internal evidence of the letters, and from cross-referencing names, dates and other biographical details with the Clergy of the Church of England Database at <https://theclergydatabase.org.uk/>, accessed 21 June 2024.

behalf; a sort of post-Reformation rhetorical evolution of the soteriological and apotropaic patronage of medieval saints.[93] Writers also incorporated smaller fragments of biblical language into their letters, such as 'then, (in A momente: or the Twynkelynge of An Eye:)'.[94] The language, stories, characters, precedents and lessons of Scripture suffused the ways in which the Lansdowne authors understood their misfortune, and also their relationship to authority figures. Biblical ideas of justice and mercy helped to frame the ways in which these diverse authors understood their own deservingness and entitlement to aid, as part of a larger discourse whereby the majesty of God and his love for his people acted as the ultimate archetype for earthly authority, and those authorities' duty of care towards their subjects.[95] And those in distress appear to have participated fully, thoughtfully and strategically in the broader scriptural culture of the age.

IV

Finally, the Lansdowne letters also reveal the deep psychological impact of the experience of living through a period of religious change, division and conflict upon those suffering distress. For some authors, of course, the consequences of the change in state religion were still impacting on their lives in significant ways. Writing in 1572, just two years after the papal bull *Regnans in excelsis* excommunicated Elizabeth I and freed her Catholic subjects from obedience to her, the imprisoned priest Thomas Woodhouse called on Burghley 'that ye humblye and unfeanedly even from the very bottomme of your harte acknowledge and confesse your great iniquytie' in disobeying the supreme authority of the papacy. The reward for steering England back into the Catholic fold would be 'a most floryshinge and happy state in the Christian common wealth'; the punishment for not doing so 'the great de-solucyon and ruyn of our beloved countrye and people'.[96] The radical antinomian Robert Banister, from the opposite end of the confessional spectrum, railed against 'our English Jues, the presies puritantes … that do in all places of your dominions pevuate youre highness subjectes, from all obedience'.[97] Banister embarked on a sustained character assassination of Elizabethan Puritanism, at the feet of which he attributed not just his own downfall, but also lamented that 'yf god by the wounderfull wisdom, & motherly marcy of your modesty, did not bridell . ther firy hipocriticall sprites . ye ther discipline they dayly

[93] For example MS Lansdowne 99, no. 10, fos 22r–26v.

[94] 1 Corinthians xv.52; MS Lansdowne 99, no. 16, fo. 39r. See also Genesis ii.15 in MS Lansdowne 99, no. 17, fo. 45v.

[95] Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, 76–88.

[96] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 1, fo. 1r.

[97] Ibid. no. 4, fo. 8r. On the radical critique of Puritans as Jews/Pharisees see Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, 224–32.

call for . & murmur so at the gouerners a boute, wolde be a right pharises state . which were most abhominable to be sene, in the raigne of the gospel'. Woodhouse and Banister in their own very different ways concluded that the process of Reformation had left both themselves and England in a precarious situation. They wrote to seek personal redress, but also to restore true religion to the English Church, with the former tacking towards Counter-Reformation Catholicism and the latter propelled into radical antinomianism.

Several godly individuals wrote to the crown to argue the case for the further Reformation of the Church alongside remedy of their own personal misfortune and distress. The Puritan minister and Fellow of Magdalene College William Hubbock had been cited by Archbishop Whitgift for a seditious sermon preached in Oxford in March 1589 and tried and imprisoned by the High Commission shortly afterwards, despite having powerful patrons including Sir Francis Knollys and Frances Walsingham, countess of Essex.[98] He wrote to Burghley as one that 'standeth for a learned ministerie', and lamented the recent death of Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, as a 'famous counselour' on the side of the godly.[99] In his canticle for Elizabeth, John Castle, in his own words 'nether mad nor mysadvysed', wrote of Elizabeth's (and England's) favoured status versus her political and religious enemies: 'though spaynge and fraunce & scotland styr, thie god will fight for the'.[100] Later Castle called on Elizabeth's subjects to 'learne to love' God as fully as his 'hand mayde our quene', and to 'remove from us all errors' and help the people 'in thie lawes delyght'. 'O take from us all stryfe & wronge, & grante us perfeckt love', he wrote.[101] He went on to reveal a more controversial perspective on religious strife in the final verse when he embarked on an extended paraphrase of Jeremiah xx and began to complain about 'the case … between youre prealats proude And gods unfaynid preachers trew'.[102] He remonstrated with the queen: 'yf ye inquire youre grace shall here theire preaching aye was sounde For wich deverse are scilensyd, and some in pryson founde'. In the context of the mid-1590s, the

[98] '48064 (Yelverton MS. 70), 20. 1590. ff. 148–151b: papers relating to the case of William Hubbock of Magdalen College, Oxford; 1590', *The British library catalogue of additions to the manuscripts: the Yelverton manuscripts: additional manuscripts 48000–48196*, 185: 'Num 68, 77. 29 March 1590. Sir F. Knolles', *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 129; '[719]. Aug. 3, 1596. The countess of Essex to Sir Robert Cecil', *Calendar of the manuscripts of the Most Hon. the marquis of Salisbury, preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire*, VI: *1596*, 317. For a full account of Hubbock's trials and tribulations see Brett Usher, 'Hubbock, William (1560–1631), Church of England clergyman', *ODNB*, at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-14019>.

[99] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 23, fo. 60r.

[100] Ibid. no. 26, fo. 70r.

[101] Ibid. fo. 70v.

[102] Ibid. fo. 71r.

Elizabethan nadir of the Presbyterian movement, conflict, repression and the battle for religious reform remained live issues and unsurprising sources of distress for the godly.[103]

In 1589 John Crompton, a poor former servant of the prominent humanist and English ambassador to Spain Sir Thomas Challoner the Elder, wrote a letter to Burghley subsequently annotated with the description 'silly' by Francis Douce, pleading that Burghley might grant his wish as one of the last dying requests of his former master.[104] Crompton had a simple proposal for the godly Reformation of the capital, namely that Cecil:

> signe this warrant included … which is to searche and redress the foule disorders and abuses committed in vitteling and tipling houses in the suburbs of London, and other places upon the sabboth day at tymes of prayer and preaching, as also, to reforme their usuall dressing and eating of fleshe upon fasting dayes and in Lent.[105]

Sabbatarianism was a key preoccupation of the godly, along with the policing of swearing and drunkenness, and Crompton was keen to obtain the proper authority to be able to take matters into his own hands and to punish – and thereby reform – the 'evill disposed' and those acting 'against all godlines or good order'.[106] The fullest (and most extreme) portrait of the impact of religious change on the godly to be found in the Lansdowne letters came from the distressed mind and prolix pen of William Renolds. Renolds provided an interesting reflection on the early successes and failures of the Reformation:

> although the people began to love the truth of gods word, and to practis the same, yet when they saw the contenciones & disorders a moungste them which shuld be ther lightes & guides in holynes of life and christian conversacion, they also fell to folly breaking the bonds of charetie withowte any feare of god practising all kinde of Innormites.[107]

The rot continued with the multiplication of lawyers and lawsuits, compounded by the villainy of corrupt counsellors, 'seking ther one welth and advancement before gods honnor and the profit of the common people'. Against this backdrop of communal immorality, Renolds explained the paranoid tale of his own personal misfortunate, victimisation and persecution. While his enemies tempted him, however, Renolds

[103] Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan movement*, Oxford 1990, 432–47.

[104] On Challoner see Clarence H. Miller, 'Chaloner, Sir Thomas, the elder (1521–1565), diplomat and writer', *ODNB*, at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e–5040]>.

[105] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 51, fo. 147r.

[106] Ibid. fo. 145r. On this broader impulse see Patrick Collinson, 'Magistracy and ministry', in his *Religion of Protestants*, 141–88.

[107] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 31, fo. 81r.

pursued a model godly life, 'often frequenting of churches', exhibiting 'dillegence and careful desiar to hear sermons', reading the Bible 'and other good books which I bought from tyme to tyme, as my pore abilletie servid' and eschewing games and gambling.[108] This rather conventional godly piety was somewhat offset by Renolds's claim that God would soon provide him with the 'pure gold & sweet wood' to make the Ark of the Covenant, something he had apparently described to the Puritan preacher 'master Edgerton'.[109] The pastoral and theological complexities and paradoxes associated with processes of religious conversion and change initiated in the early stages of the English Reformation continued to work themselves out decades later in the radical fringes of Elizabethan and Jacobean Puritanism, as the work of Patrick Collinson, David Como and Peter Lake (amongst others) has shown.[110]

Anti-Catholicism was the focus of an even more common and pervasive set of concerns, deeply inscribing the experience of religious conflict and change in the letters of MS Lansdowne 99. A cluster of letters reflected fears about international Catholicism, in particular the threat of Spain and the psychological impact of the Spanish Armada campaign of 1588. The troubled scholar Anthony Greene, reflecting on the state of European politics and his own fantastical dynastic claims, wrote to Burghley's secretary Sir Michael Hicks, suggesting that the younger daughter of the king of Spain might be persuaded to convert to Protestantism if her father and elder sister were murdered, in which case 'I am now fullye purposed to come over to her, and matche with her.'[111] Such murders might be 'sufficient cause and occasion of turning [her] at le lease for a while protestant if not for ever, to shewe the detestation of that Antichriste, that is the overthrowe of her kinred, & stocke'. Greene's letter – in Strype's assessment

[108] Ibid. fo. 85r. For a similar but more detailed portrait see *The notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington*, passim.

[109] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 31, fos 82v, 84r. 'Master Edgerton' was likely the lecturer of St Anne Blackfriars, client of Sir Robert Cecil, and sometime nonconformist Stephen Egerton: Brett Usher, 'Egerton, Stephen (*c.* 1555–1622), Church of England clergyman', *ODNB*, at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8593>. Some twenty to thirty years after Edwards was writing, the radical antinomian separatist Roger Brerely, leader of the 'Grindletonians', was accused of alleging 'That the Arke of the covenant is shut up and pinned within the walls of Grindleton chappell', indicating that the Ark was a recurrent preoccupation amongst those on the radical fringes of Jacobethan Puritanism: David R. Como, *Blown by the spirit*, Stanford, CA 2004, 484, and 'Brereley, Roger (bap. 1586, d. 1637), Church of England clergyman and separatist leader', *ODNB*, at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-3327>.

[110] For example Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan movement*; Como, *Blown by the spirit*; Peter Lake, *The boxmaker's revenge*, Stanford, CA 2001.

[111] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 29, fo. 78r.

a 'heap of confused unintelligible jargon' – included allegations of English ambassadors' wives serving as concubines to most of the ruling heads of Europe, as well as Greene's claims to the throne of Scotland and the bishopric of Ely.[112] One 'Brooks', writing 'about the latter end of August 1588', just weeks after the Battle of Gravelines, recounted a series of 'revelations' which had come to him in three dreams. The first was of 'moste goodly wagons and Riche with Iewells stones, and gold'; and the third of archers clad in impenetrable silver armour overcoming their enemies and driving them away. Brooks's second dream was of 'two most wonderful & strange vessels upon the seas, which being drawn with a fewe shippes, as I thought was beset with a great number of very great shippes and (yet as I thought) these two vesselles did overcome & subdue all those great vessels & shippes in drowning and spoiling of them'.[113] In the wake of the Spanish Armada, Brooks's dreams about England's wealth, invincible armies and miraculous defeat of a great naval fleet seem to speak clearly both of a fear of Catholic invasion but also a sense of providential protection from Protestantism's political and religious enemies.[114] In January 1589 William Renolds also prophesied the downfall of Philip II of Spain, and that England would 'spred the glowryus sun shyne of Chryst Ronde abowte Erope tell it have put owte quite the darknes of Rome'.[115] In another letter he claimed once again that Philip would be overthrown and predicted that triumphant England would march on Rome and that 'all the Prynses in the world shall stop and shake at thy name, and by turns as god geves the victory so shall they com knell at thy feet and lay ther crownes in thy lape'.[116] Fears of the threat of Catholicism, in particular Spain and the papacy, were acute, but they were filtered through a providential framework which gave English citizens confidence about their chosen status and ultimate victory.

A number of the Lansdowne 99 authors and letters also reflected on the past, present and future of Catholicism closer to home. Writing in 1596, Robert Bushel, labelled 'distempered' by Burghley's secretariat and 'distracted' by both Strype and the Lansdowne catalogue, inveighed against the cost of corn, explaining that if the problem was not addressed then 'god shall be so disshonored as he was not in the time of papistri', questioning how it was possible to have lived under the light of the gospel for 'many yeares' and yet 'for the contempt of the same & the contempt of the poor god is greatly dissonered & our quines magistie also'.[117] For Bushel, Catholic England became both a chronological reference point and a

[112] Ibid. fo. 78r–v; *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 191.
[113] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 34, fo. 91r.
[114] See also, for example, Christoper Ocland to Burghley, sent in 1587: ibid. no. 12, fo. 28r. [115] Ibid. no. 10, fo. 22r. [116] Ibid. fo. 26v.
[117] Ibid. no. 18, fos 49v–50r; *A catalogue of the Lansdowne manuscripts*, 190.

moral one, allowing for a damning indictment of the severity of England's current social and economic woes. Advocating for his concordance of English manorial and ecclesiastical law, William Barlee argued against 'the knowledge of our Common lawes obscurelie hydde, from the Common sorte of people, as thei are nowe (in the frenche tounge) confuselie mixed, and darkelie sett forthe', comparing it to 'the suppression of our Inglisshe Scriptures', with those now 'counfounded, which Impute the publyshinge of godes worde, to bee the Cawse of our synnes, or Iniquitie'.[118] The prolific William Renolds explained that 'in the tyme of my servis spent in the warres the most parte of this 16 or 17 eares, I have broken burnid & spoyled a great number of Images & mase books & divers other popishe religines of that abominable whore of Rome', seeking to burnish his patriotic and religious credentials through recounting a personal history of conspicuous anti-Catholicism, anti-idolatry and iconoclasm.[119] William Paget's prophetic visions were hinged around key events in the domestic (and international) fight against Catholicism, such as the 1569 Northern Rebellion, and two significant events which both took place in in the summer of 1572: the execution of Thomas Howard, fourth duke of Norfolk, and the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in France.[120] Railing against the 'wilfull papistes' and their 'pevish pope', he assured Burghley that 'the Lord thy god shall shortly disperse them', and called on the government to prevent the export of English corn to hinder the Spanish military effort in the Low Countries. In 1583 the godly minister John Payne, described by Strype as 'very zealous against Popery & Prelacy', wrote to Burghley and Walsingham to warn them of 'suche lurckyng & Detected papistes, as vnder fayre semblans may labor styll to Dygg at the roote, to stryke at the braunches, & to overthrow religion whose Dredfull Daunger I could shew had never bene so nere her grace'.[121] Of particular concern was the potential of such 'popish champions … [and] facti-ouse heades alienating the hartes of multitudes from her majestie'. Writing in 1591, Robert Hamound (*alias* Harrison), in a letter labelled 'silly' by Douce, explained to Burghley that he had good knowledge of and credit within Catholic circles in Sussex, and volunteered for employment 'in some prison for the discoverie of the papistes practices … and I doubt not but in these dangerous times to doe good service for her majestie and state'.[122] Finally, in a letter to Burghley a man named John Parson wrote in order to issue a challenge to dispute with all who upheld or maintained popish religion, promising to confute and confound them. In return for a licence to print his book, Parson offered 'the gretyst that ever was, or can be offeryd, which ys to

[118] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 45, fo. 135r.
[119] Ibid. no. 31, fo. 81v.
[120] Ibid, no. 36, fos 94r–95r.
[121] Ibid. no. 5, fo. 10r.
[122] Ibid. no. 60, fo. 163r–v.

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cease all these religious warres, & to take clene awayre al these noyful sects, & ruinous factions, that nowe are risen up amongst us'.[123] To accomplish this, Parson would 'by the Heavenly helpe do more with the spiritual sword' than all the princes in the world 'or al the byshops & prechers with al theyr discipline & diligence'. Parson's strikingly even-handed letter in relation to both episcopalian and Presbyterian tendencies was undated, but his reference to Burghley's 'fatherly ould age' suggests that it was sent well into the reign of Elizabeth, by which time such an offer to cease religious war and clean away troublesome sects and ruinous factions might have sounded not only suspicious and impossible, but also more than a little tempting.[124]

The letters discussed here represent a series of highly personal and idiosyncratic experiences of distress: none of the individual authors can be taken in any sense as 'representative' of anything other than themselves. But for that very reason, it is telling that across a series of distinctive and unique individual case studies, religious doctrine, language, experience and belief acted as a vital touchstone for constructing, interpreting and expressing the experience of mental and emotional distress. Not only that, religion provided, not a specific 'script', but a common repertoire of tropes and resources which those experiencing distress drew upon in distinctive combinations but not entirely dissimilar ways. This article has therefore illustrated not just the details of what individuals believed, but the broader subjects on which the distressed articulated views and through which they framed, interpreted or presented their experience and their understanding of their situations. Unsurprisingly, God was a central touchpoint for these authors: his judgement and wrath, his mercy and protection, his power and authority. The prospects of salvation and damnation, and the mechanics of sin and good works, also weighed heavily on individual consciences, and temporal challenges were frequently interpreted in cosmic terms, and *via* the intervention of angels and the devil. These topics found further expression and magnification through prophetic and providential themes, through which individuals linked their fates to broader questions of sin and judgement, often as a way of leveraging divine majesty and social and political harmony in the pursuit of personal recompense. Scripture was ubiquitous in providing not only the rationale, but also the precedent, and even the language, for interpreting adversity, addressing authority and seeking redress. Scripture enabled individuals to frame their distress within a powerful sense of biblical community, authority and meaning. And the scars of religious conflict and change – some healed, some scabbed over, some still raw and bleeding – were

[123] Ibid. no. 24, fo. 67r. See OED, s.v. 'noyful (adj.)', accessed July 2023, at <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2432410218>.

[124] MS Lansdowne 99, no. 60, fo. 65r.

likewise powerfully inscribed, body and soul, on the authors of the letters of MS Lansdowne 99. Whether or not the process of Reformation was a direct cause of their distress, religious conflict was a central reference point in relation to which individuals sought to frame the nature and significance of – or the answers to – their problems.

The Reformation therefore shaped and informed the nature of mental and emotional distress in Elizabethan England in multiple ways: by shifting the repertoire of available religious ideas, priorities and discourses, and through both the memory and the continuing experience of religious conflict and change. Although the authors of these letters represent a broad range of confessional standpoints – mostly a mixture of Puritans and conformists, with a sprinkling of Catholics and radicals for good measure – and the details of their views vary accordingly, all were profoundly affected by having lived through a period of seismic religious change. It is of great significance that we observe that these letters by distressed or 'mad' individuals were not incoherent, chaotic or devoid of sense or meaning. On the contrary, the letters of MS Lansdowne 99 are carefully crafted and highly rhetorical documents. Although their contents occasionally stray into the unusual, the fantastical and the extreme, in general they display the same essential preoccupations, assumptions and sources of language, authority and knowledge as the broader religious culture of late Elizabethan England. These are letters which sometimes paint extraordinary pictures, but using pigments drawn either from convention or from broader-based challenges and responses to conventional religious belief and practice. As such, understanding the ways in which religion shaped the experience and expression of distress grants us an important insight into the process of Reformation itself, as reflected in the religious beliefs and identities of a diverse group of 'ordinary' yet extraordinary individuals. The evidence of the MS Lansdowne 99 letters shows that religious identity formation in the wake of the Reformation was not a sudden paradigm shift, or even a matter of conflict between clear confessional positions, but rather a gradual recalibration of religious frames of reference through the introduction of new forms of religious knowledge, discourse, preoccupations, hopes, fears and concerns. It was a process driven by a centralised political and ecclesiastical agenda: by the proscription and prescription of particular old and new forms of religious authority, doctrine and practice. In the final instance, however, it was individuals who made choices – explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious – about which elements of these changed and changing discourses to adapt, modify or reject in their understanding of Tudor society and their place within it. Emerging blinking and fearful from the social, cultural and political wreckage generated by formal processes of religious conversion and change, the evidence of their distress demonstrates that the English people were ultimately the decisive agents in shaping and expressing their own individual and idiosyncratic religious identities.