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Nathaniel Beal
Trinity University

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**“Let us March Against the Fires of Heaven:” Tamburlaine,
Marlowe and Atheism**

Nathaniel Beal

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of Speech
and Drama at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

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Thesis Advisor

Department Chair

Associate Vice President
for
Academic Affairs

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On February 26, 1564 a newborn boy was christened with the name of Christopher Marlowe at a ceremony in the church of St. George the Martyr, in Canterbury, England (Ingram 17). Among many other accomplishments through the course of his short life, Marlowe would leave an indelible imprint on the Elizabethan public theatre, just coming out of its infancy. Marlowe wrote only a few dramatic works, probably only six, but this modest output would exert a profound influence on the playwrights that would follow him, including his early contemporary William Shakespeare.

Marlowe was born into a world endemic with religious and political dissension. Since a German monk named Martin Luther provided the catalyst for the religious movement known as the Protestant Reformation, religious considerations fairly dominated politics. Queen Elizabeth, the second queen in England's history, sat unsteadily on her throne ruling a country that would soon, once again, be separated from Papal authority; thus the shifting currents of religion and politics propelled England into new and dangerous relationships with the Catholic empires of Spain, France, the Holy Roman Empire and the Papal states.

The country had been made Catholic by her sister and predecessor, Queen Mary. Elizabeth "intended to reverse Mary's Catholic direction" (Patterson 115). Instead of persecution, however, Elizabeth wished to "find middle ground, to reach consensus, so that great numbers of neither Catholics nor Protestants would be alienated by the changes" (Ibid). Yet such a noble goal would prove difficult to achieve. Her reign commenced with the arrest of almost all English Bishops; they had refused to swear an oath acknowledging Elizabeth as head of the English church (Ridley 87). Moreover, there

existed very little agreement on religion, even among Protestant circles, other than the principle that England's religion should not be Catholic. While the new religious legislation essentially restored the religious situation of 1552, Elizabeth had to "ignore the fact that in 1552 Protestant opinion on central theological and liturgical problems had been in flux" (MacCaffrey 57). Theological questions were not her main concern, however. She needed everyone, at least outwardly, to believe the same in matters of religion. In the words of her advisor Lord Keeper Bacon, speaking to Elizabeth's first parliament, there was a "need for uniting of these people of the Realm into a uniform order of religion" (qtd. in Ibid 51-2).

That order would be more religious in name than actual belief. The Act of Uniformity, the name given to the bill intended to establish the new religious policy, contained no theological statement or declaration of faith (Ibid 299). It simply required that all clergy celebrate the Christian service as it was set out in *The Book of Common Prayer* and that all citizens must attend each Sunday. If either clergy or laity failed in this obligation, they would be punished. Heresy remained a crime "...but the crime was so defined as to make its actual prosecution an exceptional event" (Ibid 299-300). The intention was not so much to dictate what a person believed in his or her mind, but to enforce outward unity "for fear that diversity of religion should kindle seditions betwixt and among the people of England" (qtd. in Ridley 127).

Elizabeth's intention was thus more along the lines of creating a unifying social force. Despite the prohibitions on Catholicism, religious observance was becoming "...a matter of behavior rather than belief" (Riggs 92). Religious practice was thus more of a statement of belonging in English social life than an actual statement of faith.

Catholics in Elizabethan England, however, lived in a strange political limbo. While Elizabeth claimed, as mentioned above, that she had “no intention to inquire into ‘men’s conscience in matters of religion,’ Catholics were still required to attend the Anglican Mass each Sunday (MacCaffrey 327). The Catholic mass had been banned and there were supposedly few restrictions on Catholic religious life as long as there was public acceptance of the new order. Such was Elizabeth’s ideal situation, at least. Indeed, in the first years of her reign, the fine for nonattendance at Mass was, “apparently left uncollected” and the ban on the mass could be evaded with relative ease as enforcement was lax (Pritchard 3). Most Catholics actually “saw no harm in complying with the minimum legal requirement of being present at Anglican worship,” but did not participate in the service (Ibid 4). It became increasingly difficult for Elizabeth to maintain this balance in light of domestic and international pressures. Life for Catholics would thus get progressively more difficult, beginning with a bill enacted in parliament making conversion to Catholicism high treason (MacCaffrey 328). In 1577 the first of over one hundred priests would be executed under that act (Ibid 333). Despite these harsher measures, Elizabeth still made efforts not to put too many demands on English Catholics, vetoing another bill requiring acceptance of the Anglican Host at each service (Ibid).

Elizabeth found herself faced with another religious problem on the other end of the spectrum: radical Protestants who were not content with the degree of reform within the English church. Each year the reformers would attempt to bring about their desired changes by trying to get a reform bill through parliament. Queen Elizabeth was unwilling to change the religious order and blocked all their attempts. The battle became a yearly tradition of sorts. The reformers “would present measures for reform which were bolder

and bolder...with equal regularity the Queen would halt their progress through the houses, not hesitating to confiscate their bills or even to imprison the promoters” (Ibid 311). Elizabeth thus showed herself unwilling to alter the religious status quo in either direction.

Such was the religious balancing act Elizabeth would persist in throughout her reign. It largely did not succeed in mollifying her Catholic subjects, a worrisome situation due to the problem of her cousin Mary, the Queen of Scots. This Catholic monarch had just become Dowager of France after the death of her husband, King Francis II (Ibid 169). Also Queen of Scotland, this fiercely religious woman had returned to rule Scotland in her own right (Ibid 169-170). She was also Elizabeth’s first cousin, the granddaughter of Margaret Tudor, one of King Henry VIII’s sisters (Ibid 159). It was widely held that she was next in line to the English throne by right of hereditary succession. Barring an explicit statement by Elizabeth regarding her heir, Mary would succeed to the English throne upon Elizabeth’s death (Ridley 255). Mary was thus a perfect choice for Elizabeth’s Catholic enemies that were looking for a candidate to succeed Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s relations with the Catholic powers of Europe were never friendly and would deteriorate steadily throughout her reign; aggravated in large part by the presence of Mary.

That said, there were other factors at work upon the Catholic powers aside from religion. The political situation at the time left King Philip of Spain with essentially no good options in relation to England. The instructions Philip left his ambassador to England are indicative: he was to give some help to English Catholics, but was also to make very sure that he “remain on good terms with the heretics,” Elizabeth’s government

(Ridley 86). Philip wanted Catholicism in England, but regarded the prospect of Mary Queen of Scots' (then the wife of the French heir apparent) rule of England, Scotland and France as a much greater threat to his country. At least for the beginning of his reign, Philip was unwilling to work against Elizabeth for fear of aiding France (Ibid).

The Pope soon made things even more difficult for Elizabeth. In 1570 Pius V issued a Papal bull named *Regnans in Excelsis* deposing her, at least in the eyes of the Catholic Church (Patterson 178). He nullified all oaths of allegiance sworn to her by her subjects, and proclaimed anyone who followed her orders to be "damned along with her" (Ridley 171). The battle lines were officially drawn: it was "an open declaration of war" (MacCaffrey 335). Catholics had to decide where their loyalties lay.

The reactions of the English Catholic population to this dilemma were many and varied. Many of them responded by conceiving of an idea of separate religious and political loyalty. They were loyal to the Pope in matters of religion, but still wished to "remain obedient subjects of the Queen in all matters secular." This formulation ran contrary to both Elizabeth's religious ideas as well as the Roman Catholic Church's, but many Catholics still attempted to follow it. It was put to good use during the time of the Armada, when a group of Catholic soldiers under the English Lord Montague arrived to fight alongside Protestant soldiers (Cross 145-6).

Efforts by the Roman Catholic Church to reconvert England began in earnest in 1575 and were led by the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). Their plans were originally entirely religious and based around the goal of conversion of Protestants (MacCaffrey 337). The Jesuits were not making active political assaults, but as one scholar put it: "...one could hardly blame the English government for assuming that, once the Jesuits'

work was done, their flock would obey the papal decree against the Queen” (Ibid 333). In other words, while the priests were not at the time overtly calling for Elizabeth’s overthrow, the political and religious dimensions of conversion were linked. It was not unreasonable to assume that once converted, the “new” Catholics would obey Pope Pius’ Bull. As one scholar puts it, the priests’ leaders made it clear that, “given a favorable opportunity, such as the invasion of England by forces loyal to the Papacy or the possible substitution of a Catholic for a Protestant monarch, they expected the priests to declare for the Catholic side” (Cross 145)

By 1578, a coalition consisting of the Pope (at the time named Gregory XIII), the Spanish Empire, Catholic Englishmen and the Queen of Scotland had come together with the mutual goal of removing Elizabeth from the throne as soon as possible with the goal of replacing her with Mary (MacCaffrey 340). The coalition went through numerous, ultimately abortive plans to invade England from different locations in Europe or to invade Ireland as a beginning maneuver against England (Ibid 339-342). Their attempts were made all the more threatening to Elizabeth by the existence of Mary, Queen of Scots. A restoration of Catholicism to England required a very Catholic monarch, and Mary was perfectly suited for it (Ridley 159). It is unlikely that anyone, save diehard Protestant loyalists, would have challenged Mary’s right to rule if Elizabeth had been removed or died due to their family ties. Any plot would be immeasurably strengthened with her at its head.

Matters were not helped when Elizabeth became responsible for Mary. A Scottish civil war had broken out following Mary’s second marriage to the Earl of Bothwell. Mary was captured following a brief campaign and forced to abdicate in favor of her son, who

would become King James VI and later James I of England. She was then imprisoned. In 1568 she succeeded in escaping and raising another army but was quickly defeated. Lacking other options, she fled south to the care of her cousin Queen Elizabeth (MacCaffrey 104-5). The person who was essentially the future Catholic English Queen-in-waiting was now inside the country.

During the last years of the 1580s and into the 1590s Elizabeth's councilors became increasingly convinced "...that Elizabeth's throne and...her life would not be safe so long as Mary lived..." (MacCaffrey 343). The problem was not so much Mary herself - she was never freed -- but what she represented: the story of her very existence as a prisoner served the Catholic powers as excellent propaganda. She "had become a magnetic pole for any dissenting opinion in Elizabeth's England" (Dunn 430). Combined with the fact that, as noted above, Mary was an extremely close relative and thus a prime candidate to succeed her cousin, she was a threat by her very existence.

Those among Elizabeth's subjects who held the opinion that Mary's life was a threat to Elizabeth were soon proved right. A new plot had arisen, led by a man named Babington. The group of traitors intended to kill Elizabeth and rescue Mary (MacCaffrey 347). Queen Mary gave her approval, a fact which Elizabeth's intelligence service quickly discovered (Ibid 348).

Mary was subsequently put on trial in 1586 but the jury reached no verdict (Ibid 347-8). Her guilt, however, was clear. Elizabeth found herself confronted with a dilemma: if Elizabeth's throne was to be secure Mary could not continue living, but Mary was herself a monarch. The execution of one monarch by another, whatever the monarch's crimes, was an as yet unthinkable proposition. It treated the offending

monarch as if she were bound by human law instead of being "...above all human judgments." (Ibid 351). The problem lay in the fact that all European monarchs were protected by essentially the same idea: they were God's representatives on earth and hence answerable only to Him. For all of the legal justifications that had been laid down by Elizabeth's counselors -- the trial and preparation of a formal death warrant-- it was still largely impossible for Elizabeth to take responsibility because she would be attacking the very basis of her own immunity. A scapegoat was thus found in the person of William Davison, the man trusted by Elizabeth's other advisors to get her to sign the death warrant (Dunn 492). On February 1st, Elizabeth "sent for the death warrant and signed it without a fuss," but later blamed him for Mary's death and had him imprisoned in the Tower of London (Ibid 493, 497). He was freed over a year later, but never rejoined the government (MacCaffrey 353).

Even though their monarch had brought about the murder of their figurehead, many English Catholics still rallied behind Elizabeth. The reason lay in Spanish King Philip II and his plans for an invasion of England. Despite earlier predictions, most English supporters of Mary were driven more by "hatred of the Spanish...than antagonism to their Protestant Queen" (Dunn 501). The Armada was defeated through a combination of good luck and inclement weather in the Atlantic (MacCaffrey 239). Elizabeth's throne was secure for a brief period of time, but the instability and fighting were by no means over: The continent-wide political controversy that she found herself in the middle of would last for the rest of her reign and beyond. In the words of one scholar: "one battle had been won, but there was a war yet to be fought" (Ibid 241).

It was in this climate of religious and political ambiguity that Marlowe was born, an ideal time for a man of letters willing to buck prevailing orthodoxy, especially religious orthodoxy. The political and religious order of Marlowe's native land was no longer set in stone. The nature of its people's religion had changed from allegiance to the traditions of an ancient church to obeying the fiat of parliament and the monarch. One anointed monarch had been executed by another and the Queen of England ruled in defiance of the Pope of Rome. It was a time where old assumptions had been called into question and in many cases broken outright, rather like the world Marlowe's Tamburlaine would create by force.

The young Marlowe apparently showed aptitude for academics early in life. A child from a tradesman's family, like Marlowe, did not usually attend school past the age of eight, but Marlowe moved to grammar school. He then won a special scholarship to the King's School in Canterbury. After the completion of his studies, he obtained the Parker Scholarship, created by a former Archbishop of Canterbury, which paid his way through his degrees at Cambridge (Riggs 27). The scholarship was intended for those students who planned to enter the priesthood of the Church of England -- an irony, in Marlowe's case, considering his later reputation as an atheist. (Norman 14).

The course of study Marlowe encountered was a relatively new one. Since the reign of Edward VI, the university curricula had become focused on, as one scholar puts it, "classical and Biblical literature, together with such science as was then known" (Bakeless 59). Each morning Marlowe listened to lectures on logic and philosophy and then left the college to hear still more lectures by different scholars in the city's public lecture halls. The afternoons were spent studying Greek, followed by rhetoric. The late

afternoon involved instruction in the proper rules and procedures of scholarly debate (Riggs 78). Such was the scholarly life of the man from Cambridge. These studies could easily have affected his religious beliefs, and as such will be discussed later in that context.

After completing his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1587, Marlowe started working towards a Master's Degree. Yet he was frequently recorded as being absent from Cambridge. There is no definite record of his activities during these absences, but he was evidently suspected by Cambridge officials of harboring Catholic opinions, dangerous ones to espouse at the time. They apparently also believed that during those absences he had attended or was planning to attend a Jesuit seminary in the French town of Rheims (Wells 79).

As mentioned above, plots of varying degrees of seriousness to overthrow and kill Elizabeth were rampant -- and frequently involved priests. This seminary at Rheims stood at the forefront of such efforts, and as such was being used by the Vatican to train sympathetic Catholics in the priesthood and send them back to England. The school served as "a rallying-point for Catholic Englishmen of all social strata" (Nicholl 121). It must be remembered that these seminarians were essentially traitors, at least as far as the government was concerned. Previous Jesuit missions had been heavily involved in plots to overthrow or kill Queen Elizabeth. The English government regarded the seminary as a serious threat to their security and set about to, if not destroy it, at least keep it under intense surveillance (Rowse 29). As one Catholic present at the seminary said, the English government "resolved to begin another way of persecution, which was to put sedition among ourselves, by sending over spies and traitors..." (Nicholl 122). The

seminary particularly recruited “many ‘fit youths’ from Cambridge and Oxford,” this lending credence to the theory that Marlowe served as a spy (Ibid 121). It would be a natural course of action for the English intelligence service to employ a student at Cambridge to infiltrate the group of students considering defection.

Due to their suspicion of Marlowe’s involvement in this controversy, Marlowe’s professors at Cambridge were planning to withhold his degree. The Queen’s Privy Council had other ideas, however, and wrote to his superiors at Cambridge to say that:

Their Lordships thought good to certefie that he had no such intent but that in all his accons he had behaved him selfe orderlie and discretelie whereby he had done her majestie good service, and deserued to be rewarded for his faithfull dealings...(Bakeless 77).

In other words, whatever Marlowe had been doing (it is not known whether he actually went to Rheims), he was not a traitor, but had been on government business and thus deserved to get his degree. There is also no record of what precisely Marlowe did after receiving his M.A., but records indicated that he soon showed up in London writing plays for the Lord Admiral’s Men, the preeminent theatre company at the time (Leech 3).

The London theatre scene was thriving and men such as Marlowe were largely responsible for the theatre’s growing success. A group of men known collectively in later years as “The University Wits” were revolutionizing the theatre and turning it into mainstream entertainment. So called because they were almost all graduates of a university, they revolutionized London theatre. With *The Spanish Tragedy*, Thomas Kyd popularized tragedy modeled on the writings of the ancient Roman writer Seneca. John Lyly wrote numerous comedies based on mythology for performance at court and Robert

Greene produced voluminous amounts of plays of all kinds. George Peele wrote plays and civic pageants for performance in London. In the *The Arraignment of Paris*, he experimented in some sections with blank verse several years before Marlowe (Putt 27-30). Marlowe himself would “produce a bravely liberating type of drama which has bracketed him...with William Shakespeare,” arguably the most famous writer of the Elizabethan era (Ibid 27).

The reason for Marlowe’s fame can be traced to his creation of a play written primarily in blank verse: *Tamburlaine* (Riggs 30). He was not the first to use blank verse in a dramatic work but he was the first to catch a glimpse of its full potential. It is true that Marlowe did die young and found himself quickly eclipsed by Shakespeare and his other successors, “...no other poet would so rapidly make more *difference* to the new art form than this outrageous youngster with the ungoverned passion...in the confident discipline of his verse.” (Putt 48). As Putt puts it, “...*Tamburlaine*’s thunder shook the language...” (Ibid 30). With *Tamburlaine* Marlowe showed other playwrights just how powerful their work could be.

Despite or perhaps because of his success (the breadth of which is discussed in a following section), religious controversy seems to have dogged Marlowe all his life. Not including the accusations of Catholicism mentioned earlier, Marlowe’s religious beliefs were continually suspect. In this controversy, as in many things, he is a creature of his times. Since the disestablishment of the Catholic Church under the reign of King Henry VIII, disputes about what was the correct religion, who followed it, why others did not, and the like -- permeated the national consciousness (Riggs 31). Religion and politics were the issues of the day.

It was, however, difficult to discuss these matters on stage. Since the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, a court official named the Master of the Revels had been charged with enforcing government decrees regarding what material could be performed on stage. First and foremost the Queen prohibited all plays that considered in any way "...matters of religion or of the governaunce of the estate of the common weale..." (Dutton 22). Playwrights were to keep away from considering religious subjects or anything regarding the governance of the country.

The Queen took the religious part of this decree very seriously, and as her reign progressed, the centuries-old bible-based medieval mystery plays were steadily and ruthlessly suppressed throughout England (Ibid 22). Such measures were indicative of the religious controversy of their time. Elizabeth could simply not allow so powerful an art form to discuss matters that were so controversial when the new religious order and her government itself were so unstable.

One particular and unusual part of the era's religious controversy came to dominate discussion of Marlowe during his own time and after: atheism. Tamburlaine, out of all of his works, is perhaps most associated with this aspect of Marlowe's thought. That said, the kind of person that Elizabethans would dub an "atheist" is somewhat different from contemporary of who an atheist might be. If the thought of Tamburlaine is to be understood, it is important first to understand how Elizabethans conceptualized the term "atheist" and what it meant to be labeled as one.

The meaning of the term "atheist" has largely narrowed in scope from Elizabethan times. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "atheist" as " <o>ne who denies or

disbelieves the existence of a God” or “<o>ne who practically denies the existence of a God by disregard of moral obligation to Him; a godless man” (www.oed.com).

In contemporary Western terms, then, the definitions of “atheist” and “atheism” are quite specific. While members of one religion might deny the validity of another, in modern times, the term “atheist” is usually not applied, in general discourse, to followers of other religions. They may not believe in the “correct” divinity but at least they believe in some sort of “God.” We generally say, on the other hand, that someone without religious beliefs of any sort is an atheist.

The Elizabethan use of the term, then, while including the modern definition, is much broader. In its earliest usage, “atheist” meant someone who is not concerned with “...whether there be a God or not, or whether...he will recompense good Men with good things, and bad Men with what is evil” (qtd. in Riggs 30). In other words, an atheist is someone who is simply unconcerned with divinity. He will thus act immorally, since he does not know God, just as someone who is religious will act morally, as in the modern definition. Belief in divinity is thus inextricably linked with morality. In fact, the concept of a moral atheist is not one that existed in Elizabethan times.

The term “atheist” expanded in the Elizabethan consciousness and eventually accusations of atheism were leveled against persons who held many different opinions and beliefs, many of which were diametrically opposed to each other. Everything from denying the divine inspiration of the Christian Bible to Deism, Arianism or essentially “any extreme or radical religious belief” could merit an accusation of atheism (Buckley 50). Elizabethan atheism was thus not only a denial of religion or divinity, but could also be a questioning of the current Protestant orthodoxy. This was “irreligion in the sense of a

more or less extreme attack on orthodox Christianity” (Hunter 136). As such, varying beliefs such as Anabaptism, Unitarianism and almost anything in between were vulnerable to accusations of atheism (Buckley 50, 59).

Charges of atheism could also be used to attack people who were not religious enough, even if their particular doctrinal opinions were “correct” for the time. In addition, “atheists” were those who failed “to espouse the new Protestant creed in a positive as against a negative way...and in this connection lack of enthusiasm for the new religions was often conflated with a continued attachment to the old” (Hunter 139). In other words, one was also an atheist if he or she were not enthusiastic enough about being an Anglican, which meant they were probably also Catholics going through the motions to appear Anglican. In Elizabethan times one could be a Catholic and an atheist at the same time.

Charges of unbelief also found frequent use as a term of moral censure. Many Elizabethan writers viewed theology in terms of how it affected the morality of a person’s actions. A writer named Ramus summed up the entire discipline of theology as “the science of living well” (qtd. in Battenhouse 40). By this standard, a person showed himself to be an atheist by his immoral actions. If he did not live according to the dictates of Christianity, so the thinking went, one denied the existence of God. A person described as an atheist in a pamphlet entitled *Theatre of God’s Judgments* by Thomas Beard is “given over to swearing and to ‘all sensualitie of the flesh” (qtd. in Ibid 144). Atheists were known by their deeds. While this view can still be seen in the modern definition of atheism, as “one who practically denies the existence of a God by disregard of moral obligation to Him; a godless man” the modern word is still primarily applied to

one who does not believe in any sort of divinity (www.oed.com). Modern usage of the term lays a greater stress on belief than action.

The Elizabethans' freer definition of atheism can be partially explained by politics as well. The long civil war that began during the reign of King Henry VI between the Houses of York and Lancaster (both branches of the ruling Plantagenet family), had not been over for very long. The realm had only been unified during the reign of Elizabeth's grandfather, King Henry VII and the specter of rebellion was still ever-present (Hunter 52-3). Reacting to this instability, the English people naturally supported a strong, unified government. The monarchy thus used Christianity as a natural inducement to community and loyalty. "Religious unity, it was felt, was imperative to national safety" (Buckley 51). Those who strayed from accepted religious beliefs were, therefore, traitors and rebels. Atheism's most extreme form, the ultimate denial of religious beliefs, thus had as many political ramifications as it did religious ones.

In light of such broad definitions for atheism, it seems that applying the term "atheist" to a person in Elizabethan times effectively served as method of separating socially disruptive elements of society from the rest of society and safely labeling them. Atheists are those who do not conform to society, they are thus the "other."

The experience of Marlowe's supposed friend Sir Walter Raleigh, is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Raleigh had taken several unpopular stands in Parliament on some controversial bills, including one to extend privileges granted to some foreign merchants. After this bold move, as well as standing in opposition to a new, harsher bill aimed at ensuring religious conformity, Raleigh was charged with atheism (Nicholl 293). Since rumors of Raleigh's atheism had already been circulating, it was not a difficult leap

of logic for Raleigh's enemies to say that he opposed the bill to protect his own supposed atheism (Ibid). Once again these accusations seem to be politically as well as religiously motivated.

When considering evidence for the opinions of Christopher Marlowe it is vital to remember that atheism is inextricably political. As we have seen, religious beliefs had extensive political ramifications in Marlowe's time. Every existing piece of evidence regarding Marlowe's opinions one way or another was thus written within the context of the writer's own political and religious beliefs. The first and arguably most important is the Baines *Note*. It is a collection of statements that Marlowe is reported to have made beginning in the year 1587 (Norman 195). Ironically, its author, Richard Baines, also served the English government as a spy at the Catholic seminary at Rheims. Unlike Marlowe -- if Marlowe in fact physically went there -- Baines was not very successful (there is, at least, no record of Marlowe getting caught); he was arrested before he could put his numerous plans into action, which included a scheme to poison the seminary's well (Kuriyama 346-7).

Since Baines' *Note* has, for better or worse, colored most critical commentary on religious matters relating to Marlowe, a few relevant sections shall be quoted and briefly analyzed. This discussion will provide the necessary context for the examination of religion and atheism in *Tamburlaine* below. The *Note* is in the form of "Marlowe said..." Explanations not part of the cited text are included below each item in parentheses.

"Ia That the Indians and Many Authors of antiquity haue assuredly written of above 16 thousand yeares agone whereas <Moyses> Adam is <said> Proued to haue lived within 6 thousand yeares."

(That there is evidence from pre-Christian authors of history stretching back sixteen thousand years, but the bible purports the world to be only six thousand years old)

“Id That Moyses made the Jewes to travel x1 yeares in the wilderness, (which Jorney might haue bin done in lesse than one yeare) ere they Came to the promised land to thintent (so) that those who were privy to most of his subtilties might perish...”

(A statement that Moses unnecessarily prolonged the Jewish people’s time in the wilderness as told in the Biblical Book of Exodus, so that those who knew of his supposed treachery would die of old age.)

“2b That Chris was a bastard and his mother dishonest.”

“2d That crist <Christ> deserved better to dy then Barrabas and that the Jewes made a good Choise...”

And probably most damning for the context of the time:

“That if there be nay god or any good Religion, then it is in the papistes (Catholics) because the service of god is performed with more Cerimonies, as Elevatin of the mass, rogans, signing, men, Shaven Crownes & cta. That all protestantes are Hypocritical ass.

(A satirical statement that Catholicism is “good” if any religion is good, because of the great use of ceremony during the Mass. He also insults Protestants in general.)

2g That all they that loue not Tobacco & Boies were fooles.”

(A statement that all those who did not like to smoke and have sex with men were fools.)

“That St John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ and leaned alwies in his bosome, that he vsed him as the sinners of Sodoma” (qtd. in Dabbs 142).

(Jesus Christ was a homosexual, and took one of his disciples as his lover).

Such a catalogue of sins might well make a reader wonder if there were any unorthodox opinions Marlowe did *not* hold. It is as if Baines almost took care to accuse Marlowe of a laundry list of every possible sin: making fun of Biblical figures, attributing impure motives to them, denying the divinity of Christ, calling Christ's mother promiscuous, making Christ a homosexual, claiming homosexuality himself, satirically praising the Catholic religion's use of ceremony, making fun of the Apostles, insulting the Queen, insulting Protestants, and so on and so forth. The man who uttered such opinions in sixteenth century England would be perceived as the quintessential atheist, a man who holds nothing sacred. He attacks the Bible and insults Jesus Christ with lewd inferences about His sexuality. He values religion only for its ceremony and, being homosexual, has no interest in the basic family unit of marriage. Such a man stood seemingly opposed to everything.

Regardless of the veracity of the specific allegations, Kocher proposes that these inflammatory assertions are transcriptions of propositions for dialectical debate, the kind which Marlowe would have observed being debated -- and would have debated himself -- at Cambridge (Kocher 33). If they are indeed propositions for debate, it raises the question of whether or not Marlowe would actually have believed these propositions; but such is impossible to know without further information.

That said, accusations in the *Note* are consistent with other reports of Marlowe's opinions, if one was to assume that Marlowe was hostile to religion in general, not just a particular part or manifestation of it (Ibid 26). Another representative report, for example, was created indirectly: in a manuscript devoted to "itemizing the dangerous sayings of Richard Cholmley." Cholmley is supposed to have "confessed that he was persuaded by

Marlow's Reasons to become an Atheist" and "that Marlowe is able to show more sound reasons for atheism than any divine in England is able to give to prove divinity..." (Ibid 27-8). These statements, combined with the previous propositions (assuming that is what they are), imply that Marlowe actively tried to convince persons of the falsity of the Christian religion.

A second major piece of evidence of Marlowe's atheism comes from Robert Greene, a member of the University Wits famous for his liberal ways. He was a literary rival of Marlowe and maintained that rivalry until his death -- as shown by a pamphlet written on his deathbed. Within *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance*, the writer issues a warning to his fellow writers. Although Marlowe is not specifically named, the reference to him would have been apparent to those reading the pamphlet at time (Ibid).

Wonder not, (for with thee will I first begin) thou famous gracer of tragedians,
that Greene, who hath said with thee (like the fool in his heart) *There is no God* should
now give glory unto His greatness, for penetrating is His power (Greene

http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/drk/groatsworth/Greenes_Groatsworth_of_Wit.pdf

Accessed Sept 26.).

The "famous gracer of tragedians" is Marlowe (Nicholl 44). This passage implies, via a Biblical reference, that Marlowe had denied the Christian God. There are none of the other charges that accompanied it in the Baines' *Note* or in other contemporary descriptions of the phenomenon.

The third major piece of evidence in support of the allegations is from fellow playwright Thomas Kyd. In this letter, sent to the head of the Privy Council, Kyd charges

Marlowe with “monstruous opinions” (Bakeless 114). This claim might hold carry weight than the Baines note – Kyd and Marlowe had been very close – but for the fact that a search of Kyd’s rooms in relation to a separate investigation had discovered papers espousing religious opinions similar to those in the Baines *Note*. After “paines and vndeserved tortures” administered by his government captors, he was desperately trying to prove that the papers were Marlowe’s instead of his own (Ibid).

There is nothing new in the Kyd letters; moreover, it repeats much of what is said in the Baines’ *Note*, which could be taken as lending an element of truth to Baines’ charges. Here is a friend of Marlowe who is independently justifying the same charges. By the same token, Kyd’s assertions can also be seen as a mark against Baines, as they show how commonplace such accusations of unorthodox belief were in that Kyd, looking to save his life, casts the standard aspersions against Marlowe that were leveled against someone that society desired to ostracize at the time. Kyd further protests that Marlowe was “in him, for p<er>son, qualities, or honestie, besides he was intemp<er>ate & of a cruel hart, the verie contraries to wch my greatest enemies wll saie by me” (Boas cix). Rendered into plain English, Marlowe had an excitable temper and exhibited cruelty, which was the opposite of what Kyd believes people will say about himself.

Kyd’s evidence regarding Marlowe’s opinions is uncertain. Since he does not supply better proof, it might be best to take a middle course and conclude that Kyd’s accusations are partially true. He uses what is already there, Marlowe’s reputation for unbelief, and expands on it in an effort to make Kyd seem innocent in comparison to Marlowe’s heterodoxy. This reasoning is, of course, simply speculation.

There are other more incidental allusions to Marlowe's heterodox belief. An academic and divine named Gabriel Harvey wrote that Marlowe was a man who "...nor feared God, nor dreaded Diu'll" (Kocher 29). It should be mentioned, however, that the two men had been enemies (Bakeless 139). Also, another man named Beard described Marlowe as someone who "not only in word blasphemed the trinitie, but also (as it is credibly reported) wrote books against it..." (Kocher 29). In fact, there is some evidence that Marlowe wrote some sort of manuscript directly attacking Christianity. Simon Aldrich, another cleric, stated that Marlowe "had write a book against Scripture; how it was all one man's making, & would have printed it but it would not be suffered" (qtd. in *Ibid*). Whether Marlowe actually wrote such a book is up for question, however, as no treatise or book survives.

Yet Aldrich's last statement gives further credence to the idea that Marlowe was engaged in an active campaign against Christianity. It is one thing to hold a private opinion or to be willing to debate such opinions with friends such as Kyd. It is a much more serious and socially disruptive act to write a book against it. Books and other written materials are capable of reaching a larger audience and of converting more people. If Marlowe indeed wrote a book attacking the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, it indicates a greater depth of conviction for his own secular beliefs and a willingness to expose his opinions to a greater degree of scrutiny.

There is one more piece of evidence that can be inferred for the nature of Marlowe's opinions, namely records regarding the type of education he most likely received during his time at Cambridge's Corpus Christi College. For example, the curriculum had very little to do with actual theology or biblical studies.

Indeed, as Riggs writes, “the Cambridge BA course prepared graduates for careers in the Church, but taught them little about Christianity” (Riggs 90). Students were advised to do independent reading on theological matters, but had little time to do so beyond the twice-weekly meetings during which a college Fellow explained a scripture reading for a few minutes (Ibid 90-1). This time was truly the students’ only option for theological study since their normal studies “...consumed every waking hour” (Ibid 78).

Such a situation was exactly how the government intended it. As mentioned earlier, the English established church existed in a theological balancing act between Catholicism and the more extreme versions of Protestantism. The balancing act must therefore not be questioned, especially by those training to be priests. The English government needed, in other words, priests who did not feel their faith deeply. There should be no martyrs or zealots, in other words. The Church of England instead “fell back on the minimalist criterion of external compliance with the rites and forms prescribed in the *Book of Common Prayer*” (Ibid 91-92). They wanted priests who would be content to go through the motions of the religion. It was thus not even necessary for them to have much knowledge of theology. The colleges’ jobs were simply to produce a new kind of government bureaucrat: the Anglican priest.

The largest manifestation of the lack of a theological base in the curriculum arose in the course on dialectic, the study of logical argument that every student was required take and master (Riggs 80). Every Friday Marlowe watched two of his professors demonstrate this art in a debate over a point of Christian doctrine. The debates demanded that the opponents hold rigidly to “the rules of dialectical disputation” which “required them to argue for and against every thesis, and thus to uphold heretical or even

blasphemous positions” (Ibid 91). It is hard to guarantee that an idea of doctrine will remain unquestioned when a student is trained to consider both sides of a theological statement equally. While there is no definite record of such-and-such a Don arguing for a heretical point, it is known that the rules of debate were followed. Since the propositions put before them included: “There is a place of hell” and “God does not want everyone to be saved,” it can be said with security that Marlowe saw one of his professors debating the heretical side of each contention (Ibid 91). Consequently, students learned to debate serious religious questions without a prior theological bias.

The above information should not give the impression that Cambridge University was a hotbed of intellectual skepticism to the exclusion of religious belief. Yet a great controversy existed during Marlowe’s tenure at the University regarding the proper role of religion in the university and the resulting quality of its graduates. “Conformist dons,” those in line with government intentions for the university, “stuck to the letter of the statutory degree requirements. Their mission was to enforce a solid professional standard, strictly defined as the possession of certifiable learning and skills” (Ibid 92). Not all Dons agreed with the government’s intentions, however. One Don with Puritan leanings, Walter Travers, wrote that the University exhibited “neglect and almost contempt of all Religion” (Ibid 92). Some Dons with Puritan sympathies created theology courses and others focused their curriculum entirely on studying the bible (Ibid). This debate about the preferences accorded to secular learning and theology would continue long after Marlowe’s graduation and his subsequent death.

Based on such inconclusive evidence and unreliable testimony, it is difficult to say with certainty that this evidence is reliable enough to indicate the nature of

Marlowe's probable opinions. These witnesses and commentators have a plethora of agendas: Kyd's wishes to prove his loyalty and his jealousy as a rival playwright, the Puritans' wish to use Marlowe's death to voice disapproval of sin, and so on. That said, it is true that all the above evidence is consistent with that given by the others. As Kocher says, scholars "...could scarcely ask for more widely distributed, more mutually substantiated, and more overwhelming evidence of any fact over three centuries old" (Kocher 31). The evidence itself, however, still cannot speak definitively to the question of whether Marlowe was an atheist in the sense of denial of divinity. Lacking such a statement, it is reasonable to look at the body of fictional work that Marlowe left for guidance.

It should be mentioned immediately that this approach is fraught with difficulties. Examining the work of a writer for clues to his own opinions is always difficult – all the more without a great deal more information about Marlowe's thoughts and the events of his life than we currently possess. Without more information, it is difficult to discern the line of demarcation between the writer's own thoughts and what ideas he created for the character. If, however, the thought expressed by the play's characters is consistent with what is already known about the writer's thought it might be possible to at least give credence to what evidence already exists.

The question thus becomes whether the thought of his two-part work *Tamburlaine* is atheistic as a denial of the existence of divinity. Before attempting to answer that question, it is important to look into the history of the play itself.

A vital part of that context is, of course, the author himself. It should be noted that there exists some dissension regarding the authorship of *Tamburlaine*, probably written

around 1587 (Brooke 391). While there is now little serious doubt that Marlowe wrote the play, his name does not appear on any extant addition of either part (Ellis-Fermor 11). Various commentators such as Anthony Wood and Edward Phillips, writing some time after Marlowe's death, assigned the play to a writer named Thomas Newton (Brooke 386). Later scholars such as Farmer, Malone, and Robinson credited it to Marlowe's fellow early Elizabethan playwright, Thomas Nashe. Farmer also suggests elsewhere that it is the work of Thomas Kyd, author of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, *The Spanish Tragedy* (Ibid 387-8). The most direct evidence of his authorship of both parts of *Tamburlaine* is a prologue added for a performance at the Cock-pit theatre, in praise of Edward Alleyn, the Lord Chamberlain's Men's leading actor:

But by the best of Poets in that age
 The *Malta Jew* had being, and was made;
 And He, then by the best of Actors play'd:
 In *Hero* and *Leander*, one did gaine
 A lasting memorie: in *Tamburlaine*

This *Jew*, with others many: the' other wan... (Ellis-Fermor 11).

Yet the problem with interpreting this passage is obvious. When the writer refers to the person who "did gaine A lasting meorie: in Tamburlaine," it is unclear whether he is referring to the actor, Edward Alleyn, famous for creating the role or Marlowe for creating the character (Ibid). In the end, however, most authors and commentators seem to ascribe the play to Marlowe on the basis of the fact that, in terms of style, it is simply so like the other, more confirmed Marlowe works. Brooke writes that "none now doubts that internal evidence positively establishes Marlowe's authorship" (Brooke 389). One

writer delineates these into six important parts: First is the regular use of blank verse, “Marlowe’s mighty line” (qtd. in Cunningham 9). Others include constant use of movement imagery such as “bright’, ‘rising’ for ‘high’” and other such words, consistent depictions of characters searching for something unique through their speeches, “parataxis, the joining of several phrase and clauses by ‘and’ ...to create a sense of endless ongoing, of constant reaching” the use of words that “state limits-‘topless,’ ‘quenchless’... and “frequent use of ringing popular names and exotic geographical places to realize the sensed wideness, brightness and richness of the world” (qtd. in Ibid). The preponderance of evidence thus points to Marlowe as being the author and there is no widely accepted suggestion that this play was created by anyone else.

It should be noted that while *Tamburlaine* is referred to as being in two parts, the second part is not a sequel in the modern sense: a piece of epic size, needing more than one discrete play to tell its story as in Shakespeare’s three-part *Henry VI* or *1 and 2 Henry IV*. In fact, the prologue attached to Part II makes that clear: “The general welcomes Tamburlaine received/When he arrived last upon our stage/Hath made our poet pen his second part... (Ellis-Fermor 182).” If this evidence can be taken at face value and since there is no direct evidence against doing so, then Marlowe did not have this second part in mind when he wrote the first. Like any successful Hollywood movie or television show today, a very successful run demanded a sequel and Marlowe delivered it.

Part I of Tamburlaine begins with a feud between two hereditary princes. Mycetes, the inept Emperor of Persia, is feuding with his slightly more capable brother, Cosroe. Mycetes breaks off his discussions long enough to send his trusted General, Theridamas, to deal with “that paltry Scythian,” a rebel named Tamburlaine who had

been engaging in petty acts of rebellion (Ellis-Fermor 71-2). After Mycetes leaves, Cosroe and other Persian lords discuss their plan to overthrow Mycetes and confer the Empery on Cosroe (Ibid 74). This quickly comes to pass and the nobles crown him Emperor.

The following scene presents an obvious contrast, introducing Tamburlaine himself leading the captive Zenocrate, the daughter of the Soldan of Egypt and the other lords captured with her. He does not wish to ransom her, but declares that he seeks to win her affection. He talks of his future triumphs and the honor that they will bring her (Ibid 79-81). Theridamas arrives to destroy him, but Tamburlaine quickly convinces him to defect and join Tamburlaine's forces (Ibid 89).

Meanwhile Cosroe, thinking he will be able to control Tamburlaine, frames an alliance with him to destroy Mycetes' forces. Mycetes elsewhere resolves to destroy Tamburlaine and his brother quickly (Ibid 92-96). Cosroe has concluded what he thinks is a deal with Tamburlaine: Tamburlaine will destroy Mycetes for him and will be handsomely rewarded with power and influence inside Cosroe's Persia (Ibid 99-103).

The next scene presents Mycetes running defeated from the battle and trying to hide his crown. Tamburlaine enters, mocking him. He seizes the crown and then gives it back again, disdainingly to take it so easily from someone who is "no match for mighty Tamburlaine" (Ibid 103-4).

Soon afterwards Cosroe, in gratitude, makes Tamburlaine "regent of Persia, and general lieutenant of my armies" (Ibid 105). He thinks that he has tamed the upstart conqueror by employing him. The alliance does not last: the line following Cosroe's exit begins a discussion between Tamburlaine and his followers regarding the virtues of being

a King like Cosroe. They discuss how easy it is to make a King: they had just raised Cosroe to the Kingship with relative ease. Tamburlaine comments that he could easily seize the crown from Cosroe if he wished and rule the entire Persian Empire. His followers readily agree to the idea and they set off to destroy their erstwhile ally without further ado (Ibid 107-8). Cosroe and the remainder of the Persian army are killed in the following scenes. The scene ends with Tamburlaine triumphantly crowned King of Persia (Ibid 109-115).

In these first few scenes, Marlowe establishes the vital themes of Part I. The first is the power of a human person to alter circumstances both metaphorically and in actuality. In the beginning of the second scene of act one, the behavior of Zenocrate and Tamburlaine is that which can be expected of two people of such different social positions. Zenocrate is a high born lady in the power of a low born brigand. She starts to plead for her ransom but, upon seeing him, she wonders if this man is somehow different. She qualifies her description of him as a shepherd by wondering “if, as those seem’st thou art so mean a man” (Ibid 78). Just by virtue of Tamburlaine’s appearance the usual relationships of high born and low born start to change. Something indefinable about him does not fit into the usual hierarchal framework that the scene begins under, and Zenocrate is the first who perceives that fact. Marlowe quickly establishes that Tamburlaine is unusual.

As are his ideas. Tamburlaine refuses to allow her to still conceive of him as a shepherd, and swears that soon she will know that “I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove” (Ellis-Fermor 79). The deeds he will accomplish will make him a lord. Within that speech, he undergoes a change in his own mind. He symbolically casts off the clothes of

his own life: “Lie here, ye weeds that I disdain to wear!” and becomes something better, a conqueror: “<t>his complete armour and this curtle-axe/Are adjuncts more beseeming Tamburlaine” (Ibid). Through the power of his will, expressed by means of his speech, he becomes something different. He changes his place in the hierarchy of human beings by the simple force of his will. He does by declaring that it is so and then sets out to do it. The theme of human willpower recurs throughout Part I and Part II.

Also important is that Marlowe does not allow Tamburlaine to be all that different from other humans. He may talk of Gods and use godlike power but still retains a very human cunning that desires to fulfill extremely human wants. With Tamburlaine, godliness (at least in the Christian sense) does not follow from godly power. His godliness seems more along the lines of Zeus and the other Olympian gods than the Christian God. For example, when seeking to make Zenocrate his willing wife, Tamburlaine subjects her to a seductive speech in which he compares her to the love interest of Jove, King of Gods and calls her “<f>airer than whitest snow on Scythian hills” (Ibid 81). When one of his followers wonders that Tamburlaine is so suddenly in love, Tamburlaine breaks off and says in an aside to him: “Techelles, women must be flattered/ But this is she with whom I am in love” (Ibid 82). In other words, he is indeed in love but it is his goal to be. A mighty conqueror needs an Empress. Even here he has a plan in mind. This anecdote already shows a devaluing of religion from the lofty Christian cosmos to the more earthy and human Greco-Roman universe.

The scene in which Tamburlaine encounters the defeated Mycetes further emphasizes the power of human will by illustrating the impermanence of symbols. Mycetes acts like the king is the person who physically possesses the crown, which

serves as the symbol of kingly authority: “<o>ur crown the pin that thousands seek to cleave/ Therefore in policy I think it good/to hide it close (Ibid 103). Yet his rival Tamburlaine has no such illusions and mocks Mycetes. Tamburlaine asks in regard to the crown: “You will not sell it, will ye?” He then takes the crown from him, but quickly gives it back: “I lend it thee/Till I may see thee hemm’d with armed men.” That the soldiers and people of Persia see Mycetes’ crown taken from him is far more important than the actual possession of it. Tamburlaine is King already by virtue of what he did: defeated Mycetes’ armies. Neither Mycetes nor the symbols that once sustained his power have any efficacy left.

That Mycetes lost all right to rule is especially important for what it says of the legitimacy of a country’s rulers within the world of Tamburlaine. What is missing in the scene between Mycetes and Tamburlaine is central: Tamburlaine does not attribute his victory to anything but himself. No divine power that once supported Mycetes now supports him. He gives thanks to no power. Tamburlaine has won and thus destroyed Mycetes’ right to the Kingship by his own skill. Once he has lost to Tamburlaine Mycetes suddenly has no more right to be King. He has no further legitimacy. In this world Kings are simply those who have the most power. Marlowe, in other words, removes from the play’s world the divine sanction that legitimizes most European kings. This event continues the reduction of the power of divinity to affect the play’s world. Human ability is, in turn, emphasized.

Tamburlaine reinforces this idea of overwhelming human power by explicitly making his soldiers the only means by which he rules. After the destruction of Cosroe

and Mycetes Tamburlaine rules Persia in his own right. After his triumph he proclaims to his generals:

Though mars himself, the angry god of arms,
 And all the earthly potentates conspire
 To dispossess me of this diadem,
 Yet will I wear it in despite of them,
 As great commander of this eastern world,
If you but say that Tamburlaine shall reign.

(Ellis-Fermor 115, emphasis added.)

As long as Tamburlaine's soldiers fight for him he will be King, even if the god of war himself attempts to defeat him. This idea is directly contrary to the Elizabethan understanding of what being a King meant, which is probably the understanding imparted to Marlowe from his birth. As scholar John McKenna puts it, "...God was English and England His Elect Nation" (McKenna 25). Probably in reaction to similar French claims, England had actively "sought to usurp this French status as most favored nation" since the reign of King Henry III (Ibid). The English crown sought to prove that God had a special connection with England and thus favored it over other nations. This principal was first established during the reign of Richard II. Richard's rule saw the creation of a national narrative in which the king had been "sent to preside over them just as God had sent His Beloved Son into the world; the king was God's vicar or legate over them on earth..." (Ibid 31). This version of "the divine right of kings" ushered in a long tradition of active attempts to compare the King to Christ, and "his loyal followers as the new Chosen People" (Ibid). Like the original Chosen People, the Jews, God would remove

His favor if they displeased Him. In fact, one bishop at the time warned in a sermon that “<g>od who was accustomed to being English will abandon us” if the English did not fulfill His expectations (Ibid 32).

English kings drew their right to rule, in other words, from their sanction by the Christian God. They were God’s Kings and His appointed rulers on earth. Even if an English king lost his kingdom in a rebellion, for example, he was still irrevocably the rightful king. In Tamburlaine’s world, however, there is no sanction other than what the king himself can establish by the force he brings to bear. Kings are simply the most powerful of their fellow human beings. When a person with greater power, arises they become the King; the crown itself has no power.

Marlowe reinforces the removal of this kingly mystique by making the first rulers that he – and the audience – encounters seem ridiculous. As noted, the play begins with a King (of Persia) and his brother, Mycetes and Cosroe, arguing. Mycetes laments that he is upset but cannot explain it to anyone and asks his brother, Cosroe, to explain it for him. Cosroe responds by blaming the decline of their Empire on the ineptitude of his brother. Mycetes, in anger, tells Cosroe he could easily have him killed, but backs down on advice of his councilors (Ellis-Fermor 70). He is quickly reduced to telling his councilors to simply write down Cosroe’s treasonous sayings (Ellis-Fermor 73).

Mycetes, in short, is faintly ridiculous and Cosroe comes off as a fairly two-dimensional plotter. He wants the throne and promises, like similar plotters, to restore the empire’s lost glory (Ibid 74-5). He says that:

“...it is that do excruciate

The very substance of my vexed soul!

To see our neighbors that were wont to quake
 And tremble at the Persian monarch's name,
 Now sits and laughs our regiment to scorn (Ibid 74).

This statement is standard fare, a would-be ruler saying what those around him want to hear. He comes off as insincere, especially when he moves from lamenting lost glories to implying that his brother is a homosexual:

Mycetes: "Well, here I swear by this my royal seat –
 Cosroe: "You may do well to kiss it, then" (Ibid 73).

It is thus difficult to avoid the conclusion that Cosroe either simply wants power, hates his brother, or both. He quickly gets it; as soon Mycetes exits, two other Persian lords enter to crown Cosroe in defiance of his brother.

It is important to remember that these two are in their positions solely by virtue of their royal blood. While the Persian lords may want Cosroe to be the "curing of this maimed Empery," he is eligible for that role because he is a prince of the royal blood (Ibid 74). Since no other Princes are shown, Cosroe is presumably the lord's only choice if they wish to preserve the rule of the royal house. The total effect of this scene is to give the audience a poor impression of hereditary monarchs in general and of these two Kings in particular. Despite all the cruelty that will follow, Tamburlaine seems like the better choice. He has a devoted crew of generals and soldiers and, while the topic of actual governance of a country is never discussed, he is at least not as interested in pointless wars within his own family.

In any case, Marlowe succeeds in reversing the traditional way in which Kings relate to divine power. Tamburlaine establishes a different and disruptive theory of

kingship and authority that is based entirely on deeds and accomplishments; divine sanction and the actual trappings of royal legitimacy come later. His words immediately prior to the betrayal of Cosroe go even further in their exultation of humanity, in that he explicitly rejects the joys and authority of godhead for the authority of an earthly king: “A god is not so glorious as a king/I think the pleasure they enjoy in heaven/Cannot compare with kingly joys in earth” (Marlowe 107).

Tamburlaine’s claim that earthly kingship supersedes a heavenly kingship is important because it alters the way in which the relationship between divine power and human rulers and their subjects is conceptualized. Instead of the earthly king being Christ/God’s Vicar or agent on earth -- that is, the earthly ruler serving the divine one -- the divine now simply acts as a model to instruct and legitimate the actions of the earthly ruler. This is a conceptual scheme that is focused upon humankind as opposed to God. Tamburlaine essentially says as much in his response to Cosroe’s furious rebuke after the Persian King’s defeat:

The thirst of reign and sweetness of a crown,
That caused the eldest son of heavenly Ops
To thrust his doting father from his chair,
And place himself in the imperial heaven,
Mov’d me to manage arms against thy state.
What better precedent than mighty Jove?
Nature, that fram’d us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us to have aspiring minds:

Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
 The wondrous architecture of the world...
 Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest,
 Until we reach the ripest fruit of all...

The sweet fruition of an earthly crown. (Ibid 112).

Tamburlaine's statements here contradict the Elizabethan understanding of the purpose of mankind's existence: to honor and know God. For Elizabethans, as Calvin put it, "all men me borne & do liue to this end, to know God..." (qtd. in Ibid). The purpose of humanity in the Christian concept is to seek for God, to strive to find Him. Tamburlaine, on the other hand, is born to know and exalt himself and to have God's help in doing it.

Tamburlaine's speech is thus firstly a theological statement that sums up the conqueror's ideas. In the explanation of one scholar: "God is a God of Force" (Kocher 71). The nature of divinity in Tamburlaine's conception is a power that is constantly struggling, usually for more power, as in the case of Jove. If human beings are to take divinity as a model, the proper ordering of the world is thus one in which human beings are constantly fighting for supremacy. The order is maintained by force and can be justly overturned with force. There is no other legitimacy than force and power, and that is because God wishes it to be so.

The speech also serves the theme by reinterpreting divine actions as being geared towards human good. The point here is not for humans to know divinity or to live for it, but for divinity to be at the service of the human. Divinity is both an ideal to imitate – Jupiter's rebellious example – and a tool to assist humankind. It is important to mention that Tamburlaine never claims godhead. Thus the religious framework governing him

cannot even be said to be a perverse version of Christianity: striving to be a God instead of being like God. Tamburlaine just wants as much power and assistance as he can get in order to achieve earthly authority. Unlike most Christian thinking, the focus is entirely on human achievement. Tamburlaine is striving to become a human with divine power, not a god himself.

Yet Tamburlaine also at least boasts that the divine – which is still apparently more powerful than he – will help him when it is needed, as in this case in his speech during his recruitment of Theridamas:

And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
 Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.
 Draw forth thy sword, thou mighty man at arms,
 Intending but to raze my charmed skin,
 And Jove himself will stretch his hand from heaven
 To ward the blow, and shield me safe from harm (Ibid 85-6).

While he may thus reject the superiority of heaven as compared to earth, Tamburlaine also frequently invokes its protection. This contradictory attitude is expressed throughout Part I and into Part II. For example, when facing the Turkish Emperor Bajazeth, Tamburlaine claims divine sanction – this time calling himself the “Scourge of God” – then proclaims that he will totally destroy his enemies himself (Ellis-Fermor 127). The same pattern is repeated with the Soldan of Egypt, (with some mercy for him since he is Zenocrate’s father) and the rest of his opponents.

In short we have divine powers protecting a human that does not in any way consider himself beholden to them and in fact challenges them on several occasions. Yet

this situation is consistent with the idea of putting the divine at the service of the human. Nowhere in either Part I or II does the divine ask Tamburlaine for anything, nor does Tamburlaine ever talk of his actions giving glory to, or in any way aiding, the divine power. There is no reciprocal relationship such as is found in many religions. On the contrary, it seems like divinity will save Tamburlaine if he gets in trouble, but otherwise Tamburlaine asks nothing of them. Divinity is entirely at Tamburlaine's beck and call. The divine power -- under whatever name -- becomes simply a particularly powerful retainer of Tamburlaine the King.

Divinity in this conception is completely contrary to the Elizabethan understanding of how "God" works. The one essential characteristic of "God" in the way that Marlowe's contemporaries understood Him is that He is active in the world and in human events (Battenhouse 42). God in the sense of the power that is protecting Tamburlaine -- and hence the only power that has the ability to influence the world -- would not be considered to be God at all by Marlowe's contemporaries. This conception of God is prevalent throughout both parts of Tamburlaine.

After Tamburlaine's crowning as King of Persia, Marlowe gives him little rest. The next act opens with the Turkish Emperor, Bajazeth, discussing Tamburlaine's success and the rumors that Tamburlaine intends to raise Bajazeth's siege of Constantinople. He decides to warn Tamburlaine to stay in his part of Asia or be destroyed (Ibid 117-118). Within Act III Scene III Tamburlaine defies the Turkish emissary who had come to threaten him, and tells his generals that their reward for a victory will be the Crown of each of the Kings that follow Bajazeth (Ibid 125-6). Somewhat incongruously, in his great monologue after the Emissary exits, Tamburlaine

talks of his plans to free the Christian slaves that the Turks were holding (Ibid 127).

Tamburlaine's desire to free these slaves could be interpreted as a desire to show himself more powerful than the Christian God and hence shows a further nullification of God's power in the universe of this play. A non-Christian, Tamburlaine, is capable of freeing Christians from slavery when God Himself either could not or would not. Tamburlaine thus comes across as more powerful and merciful than God himself. It is, however, more appropriate to discuss these references in light of the Scourge of God concept in the next section.

In any case, after many brave speeches, Tamburlaine and the Turks exit to fight: Bajazeth is captured and Tamburlaine's generals enter, holding the crowns of the kings that had come with the Turkish armies. Theridamas gives the Turkish Empress' crown to Zenocrate. Tamburlaine also refuses to ransom Bajazeth, intending to conquer the rest of his empire (Ibid 133-6). Meanwhile, Zenocrate and the Turkish Empress, Zabina, argue and pray to God for the war to favor their own side (Ibid 124-133). Two of the women's speeches, the only ones that are not either confident predictions of victory or insults, center on each woman's calls for divine protection. Zenocrate asks the "...gods and power that govern Persia/And made my lordly love her worthy king/Now strengthen him against the Turkish Bajazeth..." (Ibid 133). Zabina, Bajazeth's wife, asks "Mahomet, sollicit God himself/And make him rain down murdering shot from heaven..." (Ibid).

Each woman's prayers and the end result establish the theme -- which will be especially important in Part II -- of divine distance. Zabina begs someone specific, the Islamic prophet "Mahomet," for help. Zenocrate asks the vague and undefined "gods and powers that govern Persia." Yet Tamburlaine enters twelve lines later in triumph,

taunting the captured Bajazeth. Mohammed, the prophet of a revealed religion – hence one that is supposed to be closer to human kind- either did not hear her requests or is unconcerned. Undefined Persian guardian spirits, ones that Zenocrate does not seem to be very familiar with (Tamburlaine and she had just conquered Persia), seem to have heard her plea. The divine, at least the divine in the conception of Tamburlaine’s enemies, is distant and does not seem to have much of a connection with the world. The only divine power that seems to work is that which is a veritable slave to Tamburlaine.

˘ The next act shifts the scene to Egypt, the home of Zenocrate’s father, Soldan of Egypt. He defies Tamburlaine, and vows to get revenge for the kidnapping and what he perceives as the rape of his daughter (Ibid 139-40). The scenes that follow find Tamburlaine in camp, where he is keeping the Turkish Emperor and Empress as prisoners. He is using the Emperor as his literal “footstool” (Ibid 140). Soldan arrives to destroy Tamburlaine (Ibid 148). Zenocrate begs Tamburlaine not to fight, but succeeds in only obtaining a promise that her father and all her friends will be safe (Ibid 158).

Immediately after these events, Marlowe presents us with probably the most famous or infamous incident in Part I of Tamburlaine: the Virgins of Damascus. During the siege, Tamburlaine had ordered all of the army’s flags changed to black. This was his usual signal that since the city did not surrender when given the opportunity, his armies will kill every person in it once it falls. The Governor of Damascus decides to send four Virgins from the city, in hopes that their pleas would move Tamburlaine to be unusually merciful (Ibid 156-7). Tamburlaine hears what the young women have to say and immediately has them put in front of a division of his cavalry, who are then ordered to charge (Ibid 160). Therewith Tamburlaine leaves to destroy the Soldan’s armies.

Bajazeth and his wife, no longer believing that a God exists who might rescue them, each slam their heads against the bars of Bajazeth's cage and die instantly (Ibid 167-170).

Ultimately, Tamburlaine enters, victorious as ever, with Soldan in tow. Since Soldan had the good fortune to be Zenocrate's father, he fares much better than his Turkish counterparts. Tamburlaine promises Zenocrate that: "Egyptians, Moors and men of Asia, from Barbary unto the Western Indie, Shall pay a yearly tribute to thy sire" (Ibid 177). By Tamburlaine's godlike grace, Soldan's power is actually on the increase, like Tamburlaine's at the end of Part I.

Part I thus establishes the basic themes of Tamburlaine: the overriding power of human will, the uselessness of the kings and kingship that stand against Tamburlaine, and the distance between the divine power and any part of humankind but Tamburlaine. Part II shows continuity with Part I, in that Tamburlaine's actions grow more extreme and a new theme, that of the Scourge of God becomes more explicit.

Part II of Tamburlaine begins, like Part I, with an incident between Kings which does not involve the title character. The King of Natolia and the Viceroy of Byron decide not to continue warring against each other, since the army of the Christian king Sigismund is quickly approaching (183-88). Following that, hearing of Tamburlaine, Sigismund and the two Kings decide to unite to face the looming threat of his forces (Ibid 188-191).

For the first time, however -- before Tamburlaine even appears on stage -- events start to present obstacles: Callapine, the son of the dead Turkish Emperor Bajazeth, convinces his jailer to help him escape from Tamburlaine's custody (191-4). In the next scene, Tamburlaine's sons are revealed in the middle of family discord over the attitude

of one of his sons, Calyphas, towards his father's warlike way of life. The son is not presented as a threat – even at this point it appears as if nothing can harm Tamburlaine; he is portrayed, however, as unmanly. Calyphas' brothers want to go with Tamburlaine while he wants to stay with his mother. He is simply not inclined to war, a desire that would prove fatal to him later (Ibid 197).

After several more scenes showing the actions of Tamburlaine's generals, the scene shifts again to the camp of the Christian king Sigismund. At the beginning of Part II, Sigismund had been in the midst of a war with Orcanes and his allies. They make a truce because they "...have a greater foe to fight against/Proud Tamburlaine..." (Ellis-Fermor 184). Sigismund, however, listens to his colleagues Baldwin and Frederick, the first of whom advises the king;

...for with such infidels,
 in whom no faith nor true religion rests,
 We are not bound to those accomplishments
 The holy laws of Christendom enjoin; (Ibid 206-7).

The discussion ends with Sigismund, despite some moral qualms about oath breaking, sending his troops after the retreating Muslim kings (Ibid 208). Orcanes, their leader, responds with what will become another inversion of normal procedure: he invokes Christ to help him in his battle against Christians. He challenges Christ to prove his worth:

Thou, Christ, that art esteem'd omnipotent,
 If thou wilt prove thyself a perfect God,
 Worthy the worship of all faithful hearts,

Be now reveng'd upon this traitor's soul, (Ibid 210).

Just as Marlowe has reversed the way in which God and Kings related to each other he now inverts the way in which non-Christians relate to Christ. This story presents a devout Muslim asking Christ for help against other Christians: "On Christ let us cry: If there be Christ, we shall have victory" (Ibid).

Orcanes' prayer seems to work: Sigismund enters proclaiming his defeat and the perjurers are punished. Continuing the theme of divine distance, instead of joyfully proclaiming the power of Christ to punish perjurers or at the very least thanking Christ for doing so, the bewildered Orcanes is unsure about what divinity helped him: "Now lie the Christians bathing in their bloods/And Christ or Mahomet hath been my friend" (Ibid 211). Instead of what might have happened, Orcanes' conversion to Christianity, Christ's assistance (if that is indeed what caused Sigismund's defeat) leaves him bewildered. Sigismund's ally Gazellus tries to tell him that his victory was due to simple chance and unrelated to divinity, but Orcanes says that despite that, "<y>et in my thoughts shall Christ be honored/Not doing Mahomet any injury, whose power had share in this our victory" (Ibid 212).

Put simply, Orcanes is hedging his bets: he reaffirms his faith in Islam but concedes he is unsure about the power of Christianity. Orcanes' wondering echoes the same theme of divine distance in Part I. It must be remembered that the one essential characteristic of the Elizabethan understanding is that God is active in the world and in human events (Battenhouse 42). He revealed himself through His prophets to affirm this truth. A divinity that is so obscure that humans are left wondering if their prayers were answered or they succeeded due to simple blind chance does not seem to have much

interest or involvement in human affairs. In Orcanes' view, then, divinity exists but it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand. This theme thus further the overriding theme of a reduction of divinity's influence over the world in favor of human abilities

The events that follow reinforce this interpretation of the cause of events. Inexplicably, the next scene shows Zenocrate's sudden death without any prior mention of her illness or injury (Ibid 212-218). In fact, the two scenes which show Zenocrate's death and Callapine's escape build on the established theme of the distance between divinity and humankind and introduce the necessary corollary to the idea that a person's abilities and power are all that determine what happens: blind chance. If there is no other determining factor in the world but a human being's willpower, than those factors which are beyond one person's ability to affect are due to blind chance. Battles, for example, are won or lost because of the general's willpower and skill but also due to such factors as the terrain on which the battle is fought, the weather, the amount of rest his troops were able to get prior to the battle, and so on. Similarly, in the absence of some sort of divine power, events such as natural disasters or sudden deaths are the result of nothing more than blind chance. Each of these two events seems to follow that pattern. Callapine does not convince his jailer to free him because of Mohammed's explicit or implicit intervention or even by asking for release in Mohamed's name. Callapine simply promises him that if he is freed, his jailor may “<a>mongst so many crown of burnished gold/ Choose which thou wilt, all are at thy command” (Ibid 192). He simply happens to have a jailer who can be bribed. It is similar to the triumph of Orcanes and his followers over the oath-breaking Christians: they have no idea who helped him if anyone in fact did. As for Zenocrate's death, there is literally nothing whatsoever in the text to presage

it. The scene simply opens with a thirty-eight line speech by Tamburlaine expressing his grief at her probably terminal sickness (Ibid 213-14). She is just suddenly ill.

Tamburlaine is immediately reduced to powerlessness. He makes no demands on heaven, he is uncertain certain that his own charmed life will extend to Zenocrate or if he has any power at all to affect what will happen to her. He only laments, wishing that Zenocrate "...dying, be the author of my death" (Ibid 214). He is not quite certain she will die, and the doctors try give him some hope for her, that "if she pass this fit, the worst is past" (Ibid).

Her death destroys the last of Tamburlaine's hopes. He suddenly flies into a rage and orders one of his generals to "wound the earth, that it may cleave in twain/and we descend into th' infernal vaults" to assault the Fates themselves for this crime (Ibid 216). He is suddenly conscious of mortality and "heaven" has power that he does not: "...amorous Jove hath snatched my love from hence/Meaning to make her stately queen of heaven" (Ibid). He also begs her, "...if thou pitiest Tamburlaine the Great/ Come down from heaven and live with me again!" (Ibid 217). This is the tyrant's first awareness that there is one thing that cannot be conquered even by the mighty will of this, one of the "...strangest men that even nature made!" (Ibid 114).

Tamburlaine refuses to accept that there is power above the earth that he cannot control and his laments to "heaven" asking for Zenocrate back are quickly forgotten. He is also suddenly unsure who is responsible for her death, if anyone is. While he blamed her death on Jove only a few lines above, the scene ends with his orders that the town nearest them, nearest her place of death, be razed "because this place bereft me of my love..." (Ibid 218). All consideration of divine influence is gone, and Tamburlaine forces

the earth to be the author of this death, and to mourn it: “the Houses, burnt, will look as if they mourn’d” (Ibid). Tamburlaine’s desire to destroy the town is vitally important because it takes the theme of divinity at the service of humanity to the conclusion that his audience would consider logical: the absence of divinity. If God himself did not take her life, no one did. Divinity does not even dictate when and where someone dies. This God, then, is not one that the Elizabethans would consider to be “God.”

After Tamburlaine’s initial confusion, he settles on the town itself as the guilty party. The town itself becomes a stand in for the world. Now the material world is the guilty party for being changeable. The world itself is being punished because the creatures that live on it, human beings, are mortal and can die. The same world that allows such space for Tamburlaine’s mighty will is being punished because he and Zenocrate cannot extend their will forever.

This situation is an example of another required corollary to a world in which human will is the sole authority: death is final. If the absence of God’s influence on the world indicates His nonexistence -- as it would to the Elizabethans -- then He does not guarantee life after death. Zenocrate’s death thus serves as a reminder to the great murderer that everyone dies. No matter how powerful an individual might be, death itself cannot be escaped. Tamburlaine, nevertheless, resolves to try. He vows that he will now feed off the earth for his very life force. He will take it from the earth itself. The fires of the town will kindle “a blazing star, That may endure till heaven by dissol’d, Fed with the fresh supply of earthly dregs” (Ibid 222-3). The star is Tamburlaine. That he sets himself up in the heavens means he wants to be immortal. He wishes to supplant the divine. He will remain until heaven itself ends. Tamburlaine seeks to conquer death by essentially

equaling it. He sets out to become the ultimate giver of death, the ultimate soldier, and by doing so attempt to control the only phenomenon which is out of his control.

Following his bereavement, Tamburlaine also kills his son Calyphas for preferring to sleep and play cards in his tent instead of fighting the Turkish armies (Ibid 242-50). He is extending his ethic to the rest of his family: Calyphas is unsuitable to the type of ruthless world that has been described -- he therefore deserved to be eliminated. In the aftermath of this shocking death Tamburlaine resolves to teach his other sons to be like their father. He does so masterfully in two speeches, one promising to teach his sons to be soldiers and the other challenging them to not fear wounds or death:

...list to me,

That mean to teach you rudiments of war.

I'll have you learn to sleep upon the ground,

March in your armor thorough watery fens,

Sustain the scorching heat and freezing cold,

Hunger and thirst, right adjuncts of war;

And, after this, to scale a castle wall,

Besiege a fort, to undermine a town,

And make whole cities caper in the air.

Then next, the way to fortify your men;

In champion grounds what figure serves you best...

The ditches must be deep, the counterscarps

Narrow and steep, the walls made high and broad... (Ibid 225).

In order to remove the fear of battle from his sons, he tells them:

“Hast thou not seen my horsemen charge the foes,
Shot through the arms, cut overthwart the hands,
Dying their lances with their streaming blood
And yet any night carouse within my tent,
Filling their empty veins with airy wine,
That, being concocted, turns to crimson blood... (Ibid 227).

At this point, Tamburlaine wounds himself with a dagger, saying:

A wound is nothing, be it ne'er so deep;
Blood is the god of war's rich livery.
Now look I like a soldier, and this wound
As great a grace and majesty to me,
As if a chair of gold enameled...
Come, boys, and with your fingers search my wound,
And in my blood wash all your hands at once,
While I sit smiling to behold the sight... (Ibid 227).

This is the ultimate statement of the soldier's life. The life Tamburlaine lays out for his sons is an unending struggle of blood and death with no gain but what can be gotten at the present time. Tamburlaine is teaching them to become the ultimate soldier, like himself. Such a person has no need for fear of death because death is his servant. He spends his life giving out death, and what a person can give out is largely his to control. Tamburlaine and his sons are thus the bringers of death. He fully articulates this role later in his speech to the Virgin women of Damascus. Tamburlaine asks the Virgins what they see on the point of his drawn sword. When they tell him they see “<n>othing but fear and

fatal steel, my lord.” He responds that “Your fearful minds are thick and misty, then/For there sits Death; there sits imperious Death/Keeping his circuit by the slicing edge...”

(Ibid 160).

That statement however, comes later. In the same scene with his two surviving sons he is also, in a sense, obliquely comparing himself to Christ. It is difficult to avoid seeing a parallel between this passage and the famous “Doubting Thomas” story of the gospel in which Jesus appears to an apostle who doubts His resurrection and says:

“Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. (John 20:27, King James Version, www.biblegateway.com. Accessed February 4, 2008.)

Tamburlaine is thus a sort of a negative messiah, one of death instead of life. While the death of Christ is viewed by many inside the Christian tradition as giving life and conquering or transcending death, Tamburlaine simply seeks to become master of death.

It is at this time in the story that the theme of the Scourge of God is explicitly introduced but that idea deserves further consideration in light of the events of the final act of Part II. As the fifth act begins, Tamburlaine moves to his final conquest: the city of Babylon. The Governor quickly surrenders, but not before enough time had passed that Tamburlaine had changed his army’s standards to black, which means death for all those in the city.

As the city’s residents lie dying, Tamburlaine gives a long speech insulting the Muslim Prophet Mohammed and then personally burns all the books found in the city’s

mosques while daring the Islamic prophet Mohammed to stop him. When nothing happens, Tamburlaine proclaims that Mohammed is powerless:

In vain, I see, men worship Mahomet:
 My sword hath sent millions of Turks to hell,
 Slew all his preists, his kinsmen and his friends,
 And yet I love untouched by Mahomet (Ibid 267).

A few lines later, Tamburlaine says that “I feel myself distempered suddenly” which proves to be the beginning of his end (Ibid 260-8). While Callapine, who was not captured, returns to try to destroy Tamburlaine, the conqueror himself is dying. That does not stop Tamburlaine’s generals from routing the Turkish Emperor again. Realizing that he is dying, Tamburlaine crowns his son Amyras Emperor in his stead. Tamburlaine dies looking at the corpse of Zenocrate (Ibid 268-80). Discussion of the significance of this last blasphemy and Tamburlaine’s death is more appropriate in the following section, but one aspect of it deserves mention here:

For all the times Tamburlaine speaks of divine protection and divine power in both parts of Tamburlaine, he apparently has no wish or intention of living on after the death of his body except in one respect: his offspring. In a long speech, Tamburlaine chronicles all his deeds and speaks of his unfulfilled plans:

Whereas the Terrene and the Red Sea meet...
 I meant to cut a channel to them both,
 That men might quickly sail to India...
 I conquered all as far as Zanzibar,
 Then, by the northern part of Africa,

I came at last to Gracia, and from thence
 To Asia, where I stay against my will...
 Look here, my boys; see what a world of ground
 Lies westward from the midst of Cancer's line...
 And shall I die, and this unconquered? (Ibid 276)

As this line indicates, Tamburlaine shows them all the riches of the lands that he did not have time to conquer. In response to Amyras' question about how his empire will remain without him, Tamburlaine promises that a part of him will endure with them:

...this subject, not of force enough
 To hold the fiery spirit it contains,
 Must part, imparting his impressionx
 By equal portions into both your breast;
 My flesh, divided in your precious shapes,
 Shall still retain my spirit, though I die,
 And live in all your seeds immortally (Ibid 277).

Tamburlaine thus suddenly seems to expect no immortality except that which is found in his own bloodline. There is none of the individual immortality found through the concept of the soul in orthodox Christian thought.

If one were to synthesize all of the themes that have been presented here -- the overwhelming power of human will, the enslavement of divine power to human -- more specifically, Tamburlaine's will -- and the complete distance of divinity from persons other than Tamburlaine, it adds up to a world devoid of spirituality or any sort of guiding principle. All of Tamburlaine's talk of God and gods seems to have been simply a device

to give himself sanction for his crimes. In this world humans are masters of their fate. They try throughout their lives to shape the world by the power of their will but in the end cannot escape a death that appears to be final. The only thing which matters in this world is what a person does. All Tamburlaine's talk of God seems to have been for show, for lack of a better explanation. If his religious talk was not for show than there is no other discernable explanation as none more is provided.

There is an alternate theory that interprets Tamburlaine's life somewhat differently and this should be better understood before looking at the meaning of Tamburlaine's world in relation to Marlowe's religious beliefs. This theory is considered below along with the apparent contradiction in the last scene: Tamburlaine's sudden denial of the existence of life after death and with it any concept of divinity.

The Scourge of God is a common theme in Renaissance histories of historical conquerors. The chroniclers often have their protagonists claim divine sanction, usually to explain away their own destructive and murderous tendencies (Battenhouse 129-30). This concept derives from the Old Testament, specifically the Book of Isaiah, in which God describes how He will use a non-Jewish King to punish sinful peoples, in this case the Israelites. The English people had, at least in their own minds, assumed the mantle of that people: "...England was the new Holy Land and the English king was a simulacrum, however feeble, of his heavenly counterpart" (McKenna 32). The English thus quite understandably assumed the role of the Israelites in this Biblical motif as well. The verse reads:

5 O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine
indignation.

6 I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets

7 Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few.

8 For he saith, Are not my princes altogether kings?

9 Is not Calno as Carchemish? is not Hamath as Arpad? is not Samaria as Damascus?

10 As my hand hath found the kingdoms of the idols, and whose graven images did excel them of Jerusalem and of Samaria.

11 Shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols?

12 Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks.

13 For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man:

14 And my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped.

15 Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood.

16 Therefore shall the Lord, the Lord of hosts, send among his fat ones leanness; and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire. (Isaiah 10:5-16, King James Version, www.biblegateway.com accessed Nov 4, 2007).

Such scriptural passages framed the lessons the histories of conquerors attempted to teach. Battenhouse explains their worldview as one in which God renders large scale punishment “by permitting the ravages of tyrants, who are made to serve God as His scourges” (Battenhouse *Scourge* 337). Yet despite God’s use of these tyrants for His ends, He will not ultimately favor them. John Calvin, for example, interprets the final verse to mean that, in regard to the tyrants, God “...*having used them as his vassals to correct his people, he will visit their pride and arrogancie*” (qtd. in Ibid 338, emphasis in original). The tyrants then, on becoming filled with the sins of pride and arrogance, would be punished and struck down.

A representative example is the history of Attila the Hun, the leader of a nomadic people that menaced Rome during the early Christian era. Attila is described by Elizabethan historians as a cruel man who wanted the title of “Scourge of God” so “that he might attribute to the wrathful power of God his own hatred of the human race and his own savage ill will” (Battenhouse 129). He turned away from sacking the holy city of Rome only because Pope Leo managed to stop him. During the confrontation between the two leaders, Attila inexplicably withdrew, telling his followers that he saw behind the Pope “...two heroes of rather august appearance...threatening him with death with

gleaming swords, unless he should give into the pious pleadings” of the Pope (Ibid 130). These figures are traditionally identified as Sts. Peter and Paul (Ibid).

The tale of Attila’s death comes quickly afterwards. Deep in a drunken sleep on his wedding night “...so great a force of blood burst from his nose, that he who had inhumanly caused provinces to bleed with so many slaughters...inundated the marriage couch with a very large river of his own blood” (Ibid). The manner of his death is, of course, ironic. A marriage is, among other things, the device for continuing a person’s family line. Children are usually produced who are then reared to follow in the footsteps of their parents. That Attila died on his wedding night is instructive; as Battenhouse says: “the gods at once prohibited that from this savage marriage any progeny so dangerous to the human race should be produced” (Ibid 130). The gods were reining in their scourge before he could do more damage than they intended. The manner of his death is also ironic. Attila is responsible for shedding the blood of thousands of people; his death from a great hemorrhage of his own blood is a metaphor of God’s retribution and poetic justice.

The title of “Scourge” is used and applied to figures throughout history by moralizing writers. The Roman Emperor Titus, for example, while “led by his own passion to attack Jerusalem” found himself used by God to execute judgment on the Jewish people for the crucifixion of Christ (Battenhouse 339). Similarly, Elizabethan writers employed the Scourge of God concept to understand a serious political situation of their day. During Marlowe’s lifetime, and most of the “...sixteenth century the Turks had reached the height of their powers...<t>hey had knocked boldly at the gates of Europe, seizing Rhodes, besieging Malta and Vienna, conquering Belgrade, and

overrunning the better part of Hungary” (Patrides 130). Elizabethans interpreted the military and political power of the Turkish forces as having exactly the same meaning as the victories of historical conquerors like Tamburlaine and Attila. In 1586 a man named George Whetstone wrote that “<t>he puissant kingdome of the *Turkes*” serves “...as a scourge sent and suffered by God, for the sins and iniquities of the Christians” (Ibid 131). Human sinfulness, according to preacher Roger Ley, “hath so exasperated the Judge of the earth, that Turkish cruelty hath cut of the goodliest branches of this Vince, and that Citty which the Tartarian conqueror iudged fit to command the world, is become the chiefge seate of this Mahometant tyrant” (Ibid 130). Ley’s last judgment is a reference to the fall of Constantinople to Turkish forces; both stories show characteristics of the idea: that Turkish peoples were granted military and political power by God as punishment for the sins of Christians. To blame a contemporary event on the sins of the people that suffer for it is an age old tactic to explain natural disasters or the outcome of battles; it exists in the present day. One only has to look at the pronouncements of the Rev. Jerry Falwell blaming the September 11 attacks on culturally subversive figures or the Rev. John Hagee and the Rev. Pat Robertson’s attribution of the Katrina disaster to New Orleans’ tolerance for homosexuality to see evidence for the survival of this belief.

Whether ancient or modern accounts of this kind of heavenly retribution reveal several common elements among the narratives. The Scourge of God is a man of extreme desire for power and glory who commits many cruelties during his rise to earthly power. Through these cruelties, he punishes wayward human beings on behalf of God. The Scourge eventually either forgets his divine sanction or is revealed as simply using it to give justification for his cruelties. Either way, he eventually claims all his victories for

himself alone. Verse 13 of Isaiah prophesies that the Scourge will say that: "...By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures...." The scripture thus concludes, however, with a prediction of punishment for such hubris, for assuming one is the hand of God and not merely His axe (Battenhouse 171).

There is one more important characteristic of the stories of the Scourge: didacticism, for lack of a better term. The stories of the Scourge are written in order to teach a moral lesson, mostly for the peoples harmed by the conqueror to be less sinful in the future in order to prevent a repeat performance. The story of an Islamic tyrant named Nimrod, for example, makes the point that he is allowed so many victories because, in Battenhouse's words: "...the Christians are split between a doctrine of peace and a pope who stirs them to war." That statement is a reference to the animosity between the Roman Catholic and Protestant strains of Christianity that were in conflict and the Crusades that the Pope was calling for at the time. The author uses the abuses of Nimrod to teach a moral point regarding the Crusades and the Protestant-Catholic debate in general.

Battenhouse sees Tamburlaine in the same vein as an orthodox story of sin and punishment. His theory is one of the more persuasive of those arguing that Tamburlaine does not confirm the reports of Marlowe's supposed atheism. For Battenhouse, Tamburlaine "is a poetic account of the rise and fall of a single great personage" (Ibid 244). At the beginning of the play, for example, Tamburlaine sees his opportunity: the Persian Empire is failing and is unable to protect its people from social disruption. The king is weak and Tamburlaine seizes the chance to ally with the King's brother, remove the King, and eventually the brother as well. As a personal conquest, he seizes Zenocrate

and by the power of his speech makes her love him. Tamburlaine then moves onto more conquests, justifying his rebellion against Mycetes by the famous “earthly crown” speech in which he declares he seeks nothing but earthly power. He destroys the Turkish Emperor Bajazeth, who had been besieging the Christian city of Constantinople. Tamburlaine cruelly uses the captured Emperor as a stool, and proclaims to the entire world that his meteoric rise to power “has been like that of a planet, which having now reached the meridian line proposes to send up its beams in challenge to the sun” (Ibid 248). By warring against the sun, Tamburlaine will challenge divine power and try to conquer it as well.

During his conquests Tamburlaine proclaims himself the Scourge of God in justification for his cruelties. In Act IV he tells Zenocrate that he desires to literally “remake the map of the world, and that Egypt and Arabia must be his” (Ibid 250); he will completely dominate the world. In Act III before the battle with Bajazeth, as earlier seen, there is a surprising reference to Tamburlaine’s intention to free the Christian captives that Bajazeth is holding. It can be explained either as one more example of Tamburlaine’s claims of superiority over God or, as Kocher explains it, as an “afterthought on Marlowe’s part designed to rally some favor to his hero as a protector of Christians” (Kocher 79). Kocher sees it simply as a reference intended to get the audience in support of Tamburlaine. The freeing of the slaves is mentioned twice more, and very incidentally, with no real explanation or connection to any other event in the play (Ibid n14). It does indeed feel like an afterthought.

Moreover, Tamburlaine’s rise to power is also marked by cruelty and blasphemy. He never exhibits pity except to spare the Soldan of Egypt -- only for the sake of his wife

-- and proceeds to torture Bajazeth and his wife until, despairing of hope or God, they kill themselves. Part I ends with Tamburlaine victorious, having “made the heavens weep blood, and hell to overflow with the souls he has dispatched” (Battenhouse 252). His desire for conquest temporarily satiated, he concludes his scourge with his formal union with Zenocrate (Ibid).

Tamburlaine’s frequently stated desire to equal God or to achieve godly power also fits the mold. Battenhouse conceives of it as “when man seeks to become God he simply becomes the Scourge of God” (Battenhouse 340). Yet, as we have seen, these divinely powered conquerors, Scourges, at one time or another, come to attribute their victories entirely to themselves. In this manner, Tamburlaine denies divinity – but not until the end; divine power has become one of his servants and, as seen above, not really true divine power.

For Battenhouse, Part II begins the process in which “this proud atheist” is finally punished. It begins with Tamburlaine still victorious: his generals arrive to report their new additions to the empire (Ibid 254). Tamburlaine and his two remaining sons engage in a “ceremony of dedication to the life of warfare, made and sealed...by a covenant of blood,” the speeches in which Tamburlaine makes his sons like himself (Ibid 255). Following the death of Zenocrate and the death of Tamburlaine’s weak son, Tamburlaine suddenly becomes obsessed with his title as murderous Scourge of God and turns “increasingly savage, taking all his joy in ‘the fire of this martiall flesh’” (Ibid 255-256). Tamburlaine’s growing savagery culminates in a final act of madness: blasphemy, a complete denial of God’s power. He completes “...the pattern of a Scourge of God...” (Ibid 257) He denies the power of God (in this case represented by the Islamic prophet

Mohammed) and burns His holy books. Tamburlaine suddenly dies several lines after his blasphemy (Ibid).

Ultimately, according to Battenhouse, Tamburlaine is punished for his crimes. He served a useful purpose, to punish sinful peoples, but in his hubris rebelled against God and was justifiably punished. The classic cycle of events, as foretold in scripture, culminates in this conclusion. As interpreted by Battenhouse, Marlowe's Tamburlaine hardly promotes an atheistic worldview. There are, however, several difficulties with this interpretation.

First, the Battenhouse analysis assumes that the Tamburlaine saga began life as a unified whole. Battenhouse addresses this issue and does makes the convincing argument that Marlowe wrote the second part not just because the first part was popular, but out of a desire that the story of Tamburlaine be "...brought to its appropriate end..." (Ibid 252-253). Be that as it may, while it is possible that Marlowe thought of writing a second part, it seems unlikely that he was intending to do so. There had never been a play written in two parts in Elizabethan theatre prior to the second part of Tamburlaine. It was not the usual practice at the time to write multi-part works. The only conclusion one can draw is that Marlowe intended to leave Tamburlaine as the reader finds him at the end of Part I: triumphant and invincible. At the end of Part I, Tamburlaine does not appear to have undergone any punishment at all. He is victorious and has subdued the Persian, Turkish, and Egyptian Empires. The play ends with Tamburlaine formally crowning Zenocrate "...Queen of Persia, and all the kingdoms and dominions That late the power of Tamburlaine subdued" and proceeds to announce their wedding (Ellis-Fermor 177-178). There is simply nothing to indicate that heaven is in any way displeased with him. If

there is a message to be drawn from the ending of Part I, it is "...that Tamburlaine's religious ideas were admirable and right" (Kocher 83).

The conclusion of Part II also presents difficulties for an interpretation that suggests poetic justice. There is never any mention of punishment for Tamburlaine's crimes. The sequence is as follows: Tamburlaine commits his final crime: outright blasphemy and denial of divine power -- in this case, that of the Islamic prophet Mohammed. He burns Islamic holy books and, when nothing occurs, proclaims that Mahomet has no power and orders his men to "seek out another godhead to adore" (Ellis-Fermor 267). He suddenly feels ill, but his generals leave to destroy the approaching Turkish armies.

Tamburlaine's armies easily defeat the Turkish forces (his enemies cannot even defeat Tamburlaine on his death bed) and the next scene finds his generals lamenting his approaching death and begging the divine powers that had helped Tamburlaine to spare him (Ibid 270-271). Tamburlaine too rails against the gods, telling his generals they will go to war again: "Come, let us march against the powers of heaven/And set black streamers in the firmament/To signify the slaughter of the gods (Ibid 272). At the height of his hubris Tamburlaine will march against even the heavens and destroy divinity. For a moment, he challenges divine power, announcing his intention to dominate and supplant it. Marlowe refers in his later work *Doctor Faustus* to "the life-proclaiming streamers of Christ's red blood"; the black streamers then can be taken as an assault on God and the entire Christian paradigm. In fact, Tamburlaine sees himself replacing Christ and setting himself up as a secular messiah. Still, he quickly admits he will die. Even here, Tamburlaine brings heaven to work for him. His death is not a demotion but a promotion:

“But I perceive my marital strength is spent/ In vain I strive and rail against those powers/That mean t’ invest me in a higher throne/As much too high for this disdainful earth” (Ibid 275). In other words, death is necessary because heaven needs a ruler. Even in death, the divine serves the human. He must first, however, recall what he has done. As we have seen, he asks for a map and shows his sons all the lands he conquered and all that he did not have time to conquer. He invests them with responsibility for finishing his work of world conquest: “...what death forbids my life, That let your lives command in spite of death,” and passes on the mantle of authority (Ibid 276-277).

In the following speech, he invests his son with his title as Scourge of God and his crowns. The speech is unclear, but he also seems to either finally give up any talk of divinity or the existence of his type of divinity does not mean that human beings live on after death, as in the Christian cosmos. He tells his sons that:

“...this subject, not of force enough
to hold the firey spirit it contains,
Must part, imparting his impressions
by equal portions into both your breasts;
My flesh, divided in your precious shapes,
Shall still retain my spirit, though I die,
and live in all your seeds immortally” (Ibid 277).

Ultimately the only immortality Tamburlaine expects is that which is found in his bloodline. In any case, Tamburlaine dies. His son speaks a short eulogy, saying only that:

Meet heaven and earth, and here let all things end,
For earth hath spent the pride of all her fruit,

And heaven consum'd his choicest living fire!

Let earth and heaven his timeless death deplore,

For both their worths will equal him no more (Ibid 280).

Despite the brevity of the speech, the eulogy makes a bold argument that Tamburlaine's immortality is greater than either heaven or earth. No acknowledgment of hubris or guilt concludes the play, only a final avowal of his greatness. If in Tamburlaine's death he and his crimes were punished and rejected by God, Battenhouse is correct and Tamburlaine is a morality tale that warns of the dangers of pride, cruelty and atheism. It is would thus be unlikely that anything in Tamburlaine can be used to support the reports of Marlowe's opinions.

Despite Battenhouse's arguments, if there is an orthodox moral to be drawn from Tamburlaine, especially Part II, Marlowe makes it a subtle one. As mentioned above, part of the Elizabethan understanding of providence is that God is in control of the world. God, who has revealed Himself, must necessarily be involved in the rewards and punishments of a person's moral life.

Yet there seems to be no such influence. In Part II it appears that every negative thing that happens to Tamburlaine is the result of sheer chance. Zenocrate dies with no warning and a confused explanation. Callapine manages to escape from prison simply because his jailer happens to be someone who can be bribed. Tamburlaine happens to have a son that is not at all inclined to the life of a soldier. Finally, after what should have been a crime -- blaspheming God -- Tamburlaine takes ill and dies without any reference to that crime or any other he committed during his long reign of terror. The message here seems to be that the world is ruled by chance and the ability of individual persons to

shape it to their will. God, if He has an effect on the world, has made his influence so subtle as to be indiscernible. He might as well just not exist.

It is, however, quite possible to view Tamburlaine's death as an indictment of this blasphemy. Only sixteen lines after he finished denying the power of Mohammed Tamburlaine says that "...I feel myself distempered suddenly" beginning the process that ends with his death. (Ellis-Fermor 268). Battenhouse sees it as just punishment based on the close proximity of Tamburlaine's blasphemy and the beginning of his sickness. Tamburlaine has reached the prophesied point, blasphemy and retribution: "God is now casting his Scourge into the fire" (Battenhouse 257).

There is no way to know whether it was it Battenhouse' interpretation or the other that Marlowe intended. An interpretation that finds a godless world within the play is quite consistent with the anti-religious and iconoclastic views reported of Marlowe and detailed in the previous chapter. The only other piece of evidence that can be offered in support of the contention that Tamburlaine contains within it an atheistic world view: the ending, if it is intended to have an orthodox moral then this ending would be inconsistent with Marlowe's later practice as a playwright and that of his contemporaries.

In his other works, Marlowe usually makes the play's moral lesson clear. In his famous Doctor Faustus, the Chorus enters and establishes that this will be the tale of a man who:

Excelling all, whose sweet delight disputes
 In th' heavenly matters of theology,
 Till, swollen with cunning, of a self-conceit,
 His waxen wings did mount about his reach,

And, melting, heavens conspired his overthrow:

For, falling to a devilish exercise,

And glutted now with learning's golden gifts,

He surfeits upon cursed necromancy (Marlowe 488).

Marlowe is telling the audience that this is the story of a very gifted academic who tried for improper knowledge and was punished by heaven. Once Faustus has been killed by the devils, the Chorus enters again and commands the audience to:

...Regard his hellish fall,

Whose findful fortune may exhort the wise

Only to wonder at unlawful things,

Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits

To practice more than heavenly powers permits (Ibid 521).

In other words, the Chorus tells us to take Faustus' story as a warning not to seek after knowledge forbidden by God. Faustus thus presents an explicit moral message.

The same is true in another Marlowe play, Edward II. Edward is a story of moral rebellion and a meditation on the effect of kingly behavior on a ruler's legitimacy that eventually ending with the murder of the title character. After the new King has reestablished control, he orders the deaths of the traitors and kneels before the corpse of his dead father, saying: "Sweet father, here unto thy murdered ghost/I offer up this wicked traitor's head/And let these tears, distilling from mine eyes/Be witness of my friend and innocence (Ibid 570)." The traitors put the norms of social order out of balance by unlawfully killing their king. The new King has killed them and restored the balance. He offers up the head of the traitor in order to placate the ghost of his father and to show

that revenge is complete. The moral lesson is clear regarding the sacredness of kingly authority and the king's person.

Marlowe was not the only Elizabethan writer to make the moral lesson of his story very clear to his audience. In Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy (the time is roughly contemporary to Marlowe, a date cannot be definitively assigned to the work), the audience is left with no illusions. The start of the play features the Ghost of Andrea alone on stage detailing what has occurred. He died

...in the late conflict with Portingale
 My valor drew me into danger's mouth
 Till life to death made passage through
 My wounds (Kyd 335).

Andrea then tells that upon arriving in the court of the gods of the underworld the Queen had ordered the personification of Revenge to take Andrea out of hell to obtain revenge for his death (Kyd 335-336). The moral world of the play is clear: Andrea was killed and those who killed him must be punished.

At the end of The Spanish Tragedy, Andrea and Revenge enter again to complete the cycle. Andrea's revenge has been taken:

...blood and sorrow finish my desires:
 Horatio murdered in his father's bower;
 Wild Serberine by Pedringano slain;
 False Pedringano hanged by quaint device;
 Fair Isabella by herself midsonne;
 Prince Balthazar by Bel-imperia stabbed;

The Duke of Castile and his wicked son
 Both done to death by old Hieronimo;
 My Bel-imperia fall'n as Dido fell;
 And good Hieronimo slain by himself (Ibid 384).

It is done. Revenge had been taken and proper order has been restored, at least on earth. Revenge promises that Andrea's enemies will be punished further in hell.

Thomas Preston's work, Cambises, King of Persia is constructed in a similar vein. The title itself explicitly shows the moral of the story. The full title reads: "A Lamentable Tragedy, Mixed Full of Pleasant Mirth, Containing the Life of Cambises, King of Persia, from the Beginning of His Kingdom unto His Death, His One Good Deed of Execution, after That Many Wicked Deeds and Tyrannous Murders Committed by and through Him, and Last of All, His Odious Death by God's Justice Appointed. Done in Such Order as Followeth" (Nethercourt n1, 83). The title's sermon-like diction – to mention its length -- tells the audience what the author intends to teach. The play details the life of a King whose grand good deed was obliterated by his many sins and crimes. Eventually God punishes the tyrant and he is killed.

Gorbouduc by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville is comparable. The concluding speech, spoken by Eubulus, ends with:

These civil wars, these murders, and these wrongs
 Of justice! Yet must God in fine restore
 This noble crown unto the lawful heir:
 For right will always live, and rise at length,
 But wrong can never take deep root to last (Norton 143).

The moral message of divine control of earthly outcomes is clear: no matter what might occur, God will restore the proper social order. Peace will be restored within the country, the rightful King will retake the throne, and all will be well.

Finally, Marlowe condemns other characters in Tamburlaine, but never the great murderer himself. In the aftermath of Orcanes' victory over Sigismund, the defeated Christian King enters, interpreting his defeat as "God hath thundered vengeance from on high, For my accursed and hateful perjury." The message there is clear: Sigismund broke an oath and is now punished for it by dying.

In light of these selections from the work of Marlowe and others, it is reasonable to conclude that the death of Tamburlaine, lacking another cause, is the result of chance. If Tamburlaine is indeed a moral story then it seems likely that Marlowe would make the moral lesson clear. He simply starts to die and "...it never occurs to him or to anyone else that there is any connection between his burning of the Koran and his illness" (Kocher 90), and the play closes with his son's accolades.

Yet a review of all the evidence that has been gathered does not lead to certainty. It has been established that within Tamburlaine the titanic title character undermines the traditional notions of kingship by reinterpreting divine favor to place divinity, under whatever name, completely at the service of humanity. Marlowe also separates divinity from humanity with a distant God that is uninvolved in earthly affairs. Divine power seems to have no effect on the fortunes of human beings. Events such as Zenocrate's death seem to be the effect of simple chance. While Tamburlaine does constantly speak of divine powers as if they exist, these same powers seem to have no effect on the world except to help him win. Since this God is at the very least unconcerned except for

Tamburlaine's fortunes, and -- for Marlowe's Elizabethan audience this was not Godlike at all -- He does not seem to exist within the world of the play.

While Tamburlaine does proclaim himself the Scourge of God, and by doing so places himself within a common Elizabethan moral framework, the references to this concept in Part I are disconnected. It is almost as if Marlowe needed a plausible way to get rid of Tamburlaine. After giving it only incidental mention in Part I, he makes great use of the concept to provide a context for the death of the mighty conqueror. In Part II, the Scourge theme, while much more prominent, is not taken to its logical conclusion. A Scourge of God is a disruption in the moral order of the world in order to punish those who have created their own disruption: sin. This disruption, as we have seen, must be eventually corrected. God scourges his own scourge. Tamburlaine is not scourged; the world continues after his death how it was prior to it. There is no correction.

Moreover, it seems somewhat unlikely that it would have been credible for Marlowe to have a conqueror punished for rejecting Islam, as opposed to Christianity.

Notwithstanding the fact that Tamburlaine does indeed die, the end of Tamburlaine is a happy one. While Marlowe had to kill Tamburlaine off, the conqueror dies peacefully in his bed surrounded by fanatically loyal courtiers and sons while at the top of his power. He has experienced no military disappointment and his generals still rout the Turkish armies even as he lies dying. He still possesses two proud sons to carry on his bloodline despite the deaths of Zenocrate and Calyphas. Tamburlaine's end of life is certainly not a punishment. The message at the end of Tamburlaine is that Tamburlaine has led an incredible, long and unusual life and "only death came to cut off the progress of his pomp, as it must finally for all men" (Kocher 93).

There is one more matter to consider, that of Tamburlaine's sudden denial of any divinity in his final speech to his sons when he seemed to believe the divine was about to promote him only a few lines earlier. There is no real way to answer this question as Marlowe himself cannot be asked. A possible solution has already been mentioned, that Tamburlaine was simply talking of religion as a method of justifying his conquests. Whatever the case, excluding the anomaly of Tamburlaine's final speech to his sons Marlowe has created a world in which divinity is effectively absent. Marlowe shackled divine power to Tamburlaine's will so successfully that an Elizabethan watching Tamburlaine would most likely have viewed it as a world devoid of God.

Tamburlaine can thus be said to be atheistic in that such a world cannot exist with a God as the Elizabethans thought of Him within it. By extension, Tamburlaine upholds the reports of the opinions of Christopher Marlowe. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the man Robert Greene reported "hath said... (like the fool in his heart) *There is no God*" is the man who wrote the story of the world conqueror Tamburlaine who took his humanity to its limits. It is unwarranted, however, to conclude that Marlowe was indeed an atheist in the sense of denial of divinity. Tamburlaine can, however, be added to the roster of evidence pointing to Marlowe's unorthodox opinions. He may not have been an atheist, but the man who wrote Tamburlaine was either an atheist or entirely conversant with atheistic opinions.

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