

Unbelief, the Senses and the Body in Nicholas Bownde's *The vnbeleefe of S. Thomas* (1608)

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Doubt and unbelief were central to the ways in which ministers and theologians in post-Reformation England thought and wrote about religion. Far from signalling spiritual failure, grappling with unbelief could be an important stage in developing the faith and religious understanding of the individual believer while establishing a role for physicality and the senses. Nicholas Bownde's The vnbeleefe of S. Thomas the Apostle, laid open for the comfort of all that desire to beleeeue (1608) suggests that unbelief was relational and that belief required not only an acknowledgement of doubt but also extensive exploration of what doubtful and unbelieving experiences involved and how they were to be overcome. Bownde's work demonstrates that this ongoing spiritual conversation could make use of important scriptural examples such as the 'Doubting Thomas' episode in order to elucidate intimate theological problems for contemporary believers. This process suggests that early modern religion can only be properly understood with close reference to the role of doubt, unbelief and spiritual uncertainty in religious discourse because belief itself was predicated on the logical possibility of unbelief.

The scriptural narrative of Thomas the Apostle (John 20: 24–31) represents a unique crossroads between religious doubt and the sensory experience of religion. Appearing in only one of the four gospels, the episode was referenced in sermons, religious writing and art throughout the early modern period, as it had been in earlier centuries. An early seventeenth-century text by the clergyman Nicholas Bownde (d. 1613), *The vnbeliefe of S. Thomas the*

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Apostle: Laid Open for the Comfort of all that Desire to Beleeue (first published in 1608, posthumously republished in 1628), suggests that the ‘vnbeleefe’ of Thomas had multiple meanings and functions alongside religious doubt in post-Reformation discourse about salvation.¹ With reference first to Bownde’s discussion of the senses and subsequently to his perspective on the body, this essay will explore the ways in which grappling with unbelief in this period could, far from signalling spiritual failure, represent an important stage in developing religious understanding and reaffirming assurance.

According to Bownde, unbelief could be a dormant affliction within every individual but also a motivation for a renewal of faith in Christ. The language with which theologians and divines responded to religious doubt and unbelief in early seventeenth-century England reveals the distinctive and changing ways in which a new generation of individuals reconceptualized their faith in this period. The reality of unbelief as both an affliction and a necessary aspect of religion was articulated in prescriptive works of practical divinity that sought to instruct readers in ways of believing and practising their religion.² Bownde’s text is a useful example of this pastoral literature: it sought to offer comfort to those experiencing the spiritual dilemma of unbelief, not only by referring to theological abstractions but also by a particular focus on physicality, the senses and the body. The work is significant because it examines one of the most important scriptural instances of doubt and unbelief with direct reference to its sensory and physical dimensions. Moreover, the text has implications for scholarly understanding of English Protestant theology as illustrating some of the ways in which the prescriptive aspects of religion were affected by the changing pastoral needs of individuals during the post-Reformation period.

¹ Nicholas Bownde, *The Vnbeleefe of S. Thomas the Apostle: Laid Open for the Comfort of all that Desire to Beleeue* (Cambridge, 1608; London, 1628); all references are to the 1608 edition.

² Kenneth L. Parker and Eric Josef Carlson, ‘*Practical Divinity*’: *The Works and Life of Revd Richard Greenham* (Aldershot, 1998), 90–1.

These developments complicate the historiography of the Reformation, which has often argued that Protestantism heralded a theological framework based on faith and Scripture and rejected the ritualistic and sensory culture of late medieval religion.³ However, explorations of the role of the senses and work on post-Reformation treatments of the Thomas narrative have helped to qualify these assumptions. Broadly, studies of visual religious experience have highlighted that the language of sight was informed by Augustinian precepts of simultaneously tangible and intangible, physical and spiritual qualities.⁴ More specifically, recent discussions of the ‘Doubting Thomas’ narrative have aimed to complicate earlier contributions, which either claimed that Thomas did not in fact touch Christ or interpreted any apparent deference to the senses figuratively.⁵ It has been suggested by Joe Moshenska, for example, that writers such as Lancelot Andrewes and Thomas Cranmer avoided making sharp distinctions between the imagery and reality of Thomas’s touch, instead invoking this passage in order to appeal to the senses.⁶ Andrewes went to great lengths in one sermon to explain the particular significance for Thomas of touching Christ, a sensory experience that in John 20: 17 had been denied to Mary Magdalene. Andrewes characterized Mary’s desire to touch Christ as a means by which she sought to renew her experience of Christ before the resurrection, and contrasted this attitude with the approach taken by Thomas, whose objective was to believe in the resurrected Christ.⁷

³ See, for example, Arthur G. Dickens, *Martin Luther and the Reformation* (London, 1967); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge, 1978).

⁴ Stuart Clark, ‘Afterword: Angels of Light and Images of Sanctity’, in Clare Copeland and Jan Machielsen, eds, *Angels of Light? Sanctity and the Discernment of Spirits in the Early Modern Period* (Leiden, 2013), 279–304, at 281–6.

⁵ Glenn W. Most, *Doubting Thomas* (London, 2005), 145–54.

⁶ Joe Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford, 2014), 81.

⁷ *Ibid.* 75–6.

Matthew Milner has argued that the role of touch in the Thomas narrative was useful for Protestant writers such as Cranmer and Richard Greenham (d. 1594) precisely because it could be characterized as an exemplary way of using the senses to attain faith.⁸ Indeed, instances in which Thomas was invoked to support the primacy of faith and Scripture while retaining a role for the senses can be found in various contexts, including late medieval theatre, as well as post-Reformation theological exchanges and practical divinity.⁹ In addition, a text urging almsgiving, written in 1592 by the clergyman Henry Smith, challenged unbelievers to follow Thomas's example: 'I would aduise those of that opinion to doe as *Thomas Didimus* did by Christs wounds, that ere hee would beleeeue, put in his hands & felt. And therefore to all such I say, as will not beleeeue it, let them goe thither and feelee; then doubtlesse they will find it so, and say it is so.'¹⁰

Examples such as these demonstrate the multiplicity of interpretations surrounding the Thomas narrative, both as a means to comprehend theology better and as a way of countering unbelief. One of the most extensive discussions of St Thomas in which these themes overlap is Bownde's text, which provides a detailed insight into the ways in which the relationship between doubt and the senses could be constructed in post-Reformation theology. Bownde's text does not condemn Thomas or any other unbeliever, but is intended 'for the comfort of all that desire to beleeeue'. While critical of sensory perception as a means to access the spiritual, the work nonetheless acknowledges the place of the senses, materiality and the body in the individual's struggle for faith and true religion. In this way, Bownde's focus on the senses and the body can be understood as intrinsic to his Protestantism. An analysis of Bownde's text therefore reinforces wider historiographical developments in the study of the Reformation which argue that Protestantism was by no means devoid of worldly

⁸ Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham, 2011), 164, 187, 195–7; Parker and Carlson, 'Practical Divinity'.

⁹ Milner, *Senses*, 56–9, 186–7, 195–6.

¹⁰ Henry Smith, *The poore mans teares opened in a sermon* (London, 1592), 4.

concerns, nor was it wrapped up in *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. Scholars such as Alec Ryrie, Tara Hamling and Jonathan Willis have convincingly demonstrated that conforming members of the Church of England engaged with a distinctly physical, material and emotional religious world, not in spite of their Protestantism but directly because of it.¹¹

Indeed, Milner's work is largely concerned with reasserting the role of the senses during the course of the Reformation in England in order to stress a degree of continuity with late medieval theology.¹² Similar links between doubt, unbelief and the Thomas narrative have been explored in a medieval context by John Arnold, whose work highlights a fourteenth-century appeal to the doubts of St Thomas in a sermon on the eucharist as one of many indicators that material experience was seen as a basis for doubt and challenges to doctrine.¹³ Arnold makes the case for the centrality of discourse in the relationship between prescriptive and lay perspectives on unbelief while also stressing the 'quotidian materiality' of medieval challenges to religious doctrine.¹⁴

This relationship between unbelief and physicality resonates in Bownde's text and defines its place within the wider theological discourse of the post-Reformation period. His work echoed the pastoral approach of his stepfather Richard Greenham, who also employed the language of bodily affliction, comfort and healing in his attempts to assuage the anxiety

¹¹ Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), 2–4, 17–26; Tara Hamling, *Decorating the Godly Household: Religious Art in Protestant Britain, c.1560–c.1660* (New Haven, CT, 2010); Jonathan Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England: Discourses, Sites and Identities* (Farnham, 2010).

¹² Milner, *Senses*, 2–6, 163–5.

¹³ John Arnold, 'The Materiality of Unbelief in Late Medieval England', in Sophie Page, ed., *The Unorthodox Imagination In Late Medieval Britain* (Manchester, 2010), 65–95, at 80. See also Susan Reynolds, 'Social Mentalities and the Case of Medieval Scepticism', *TRHS* 6th ser. 1 (1991), 21–41.

¹⁴ Arnold, 'Materiality of Unbelief', 85–6.

and melancholy of believers.¹⁵ The notion of the afflicted conscience was a central concern in English Calvinist theology and practical divinity. Scholarship on Reformed theology, such as the contributions of Jean Delumeau and John Stachniewski, has tended to focus on double predestination as the primary source of profound emotional uncertainty about divine judgement and salvation.¹⁶ Indeed, the search for assurance of salvation was the foundation of experimental predestinarianism, which encouraged individuals to look within themselves in order to detect signs of election to heaven.¹⁷ However, more recent work by Leif Dixon has stressed the role of this theological framework in comforting rather than creating anxiety about assurance.¹⁸ The complexities raised by Dixon's research make clear the need to engage further with the ways in which contemporaries not only perceived soteriological doubts and uncertainties but also responded to various forms of more explicit unbelief in aspects of doctrine. An important facet of this engagement has to be the trajectories of English Protestantism across the Long Reformation, as a second generation of Protestant theologians and divines sought to respond pastorally to the newly emerging concerns of their congregations. It is in this context that Bownde's early seventeenth-century work can usefully be placed, with its explicit focus on unbelief, the senses and the body as well as on comforting emotional anxiety and 'affliction' triggered by certain aspects of Protestant theology.

Treatments of the Thomas narrative are also of interest to the historiographical exploration of atheism in the early modern period. Seeking to complicate Lucien Febvre's

¹⁵ Parker and Carlson, 'Practical Divinity', 90–1; *ODNB*, s.n. 'Greenham, Richard (early 1540s–1594)'; online edn (2004), at: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11424>>, accessed 19 May 2015.

¹⁶ Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, transl. Eric Nicholson (New York, 1990; first publ. as *Le Pêché et la peur*, Paris, 1983); John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford, 1991).

¹⁷ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, 1981), 1–16.

¹⁸ Leif Dixon, *Practical Predestinarians in England, c.1590–1640* (Oxford, 2014), 1–17, 26–32, 35–6.

suggestion that atheism was inconceivable in early modern thought, David Wootton has argued that the absence of strong challenges to Christianity in the sixteenth century need not necessarily eclipse the notion of coherent forms of unbelief.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Michael Hunter has argued that early modern anxiety about the phenomenon may have been a response to the emotional uncertainty and genuine doubts faced by many believers.²⁰ In a useful volume edited by Wootton and Hunter and published in 1992, which included an extensive historiographical survey, Wootton observes that modern distinctions between ‘philosophical atheism’ and behavioural forms of irreligion may risk eclipsing other, more nuanced instances of unbelief.²¹ And indeed, a close reading of Bownde’s text strongly implies that various challenges to orthodox faith in the post-Reformation period, from lingering murmurs of doubt to more explicit unbelief, could be perceived as uniquely linked with physicality and sensory perception. Bownde’s writing reflects the idea that unbelief could be remedied through comfort and was as much about the body and the senses as it was about the mind.

Bownde himself has received some attention in theological scholarship: Edward Martin Allen has produced an extensive study of Bownde’s works with a focus on

¹⁹ Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, transl. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA, 1982; first publ. as *Le Problème de l’incroyance au XVI^e siècle. La Religion de Rabelais*, Paris, 1942); David Wootton, ‘Lucien Febvre and Early Modern Unbelief’, *JMH* 60 (1988), 695–730, at 726–7; idem, ‘Unbelief in Early Modern Europe’, *History Workshop* 20 (1985), 82–100.

²⁰ Michael Hunter, ‘The Problem of “Atheism” in Early Modern England’, *TRHS* 5th ser. 35 (1985), 135–57, at 153–4. This idea is also explored in Leif Dixon, ‘William Perkins, “Atheisme”, and the Crises of England’s Long Reformation’, *JBS* 50 (2011), 790–812.

²¹ David Wootton, ‘New Histories of Atheism’, in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds, *Atheism From the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992), 24–32. For a detailed analysis of the emergence of atheism and the distinctions between various forms of the phenomenon, see A. C. Kors, ‘The Age of Enlightenment’, in Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford, 2013), 195–211.

sabbatarianism, usefully locating his text on St Thomas in a wider context of practical divinity and tracing the interconnected influences of medicine, theology and the ideas of other religious writers.²² George Hoffmann has touched on Bownde's work in the context of atheism, but scholarly understanding of doubt stands to benefit from further analysis of the text focusing more directly on the connections it makes between doubt, unbelief, the senses and the body.²³

A puritan clergyman in the Church of England, Nicholas Bownde had been educated at Cambridge and ordained at Ely in 1580. Bownde was influenced by the pastoral interests of his stepfather, but his father had been a physician and medical knowledge permeates his work on St Thomas, which presented unbelief as a physical ailment to be treated. Indeed, Bownde's *The vnbeliefe of S. Thomas the Apostle* followed earlier works in which he provided pastoral, spiritual and medical guidance in response to the plague, which was rampant in 1603.²⁴ As Bownde's title makes clear, 'unbelief', rather than 'doubt', is the central term in the text. It is this word that Bownde uses to describe Thomas's refusal to believe that Christ had risen. The mention of Thomas in the title of the treatise is followed by the explanation that his unbelief would be 'laid open for the comfort of all that desire to beleeeue'. This title did not leave space for a nuanced acknowledgement that it was often quieter doubts rather than explicit unbelief that troubled believers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

From the outset, then, Bownde's work constructed a dichotomy between belief and unbelief that continues to frame the remainder of the text. Nonetheless, Bownde did recognize that the limits of belief were often subtle or surreptitious rather than overt and extreme. Hoffmann has emphasized his assertion that, like Thomas, 'we may be true beleeeuers in

²² Edward Martin Allen, 'Nicholas Bownde and the Context of Sunday Sabbatarianism' (PhD thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2008).

²³ George Hoffmann, 'Atheism as a Devotional Category', *Republics of Letters* 1 (2010), 44–55.

²⁴ *ODNB*, s.n. 'Bownd, Nicholas (d. 1613)', online edn (2012), at: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3084>>, accessed 25 August 2014.

general, and yet vnbeleeuers in many particulars'.²⁵ Hoffmann points out that Bownde described unbelief alongside 'doubting and wauering' in the context of his attempts to assuage the anxieties of believers.²⁶ Bownde's title addressed 'all that desire to beleue', implying that there were those who wanted to believe, but somehow could not. Moreover, his work both acknowledged that unbelief was to be found within all believers and suggested that pastoral comfort based on Scripture could help restore their faith. In this way, Bownde established degrees of belief and unbelief as both antithetical and relational. His language encouraged the individual to move across two distinct states, away from forms of unbelief and towards belief; but at the same time true belief was predicated – at least in part – on previous, potential or presently underlying forms of unbelief. Discussion of doubt and emotional anxiety about religion in the early modern period therefore needs also to accommodate the vocabulary of 'unbelief' in order to reflect the conceptual concerns of theologians and divines during the period.

At the beginning of his discourse, Bownde included the biblical account of Thomas's unbelief and his subsequently renewed belief in full.²⁷ This passage highlights a number of themes that Bownde revisits later in his work. In particular, the senses pervade the Bible narrative from the outset.²⁸ The first exclamation made by the disciples to Thomas expresses their joy that they 'haue seene the Lord', underlining the value of sight, which remains a focus of Thomas's doubts as well as his eventual belief.²⁹ Christ's concluding statement emphasizes the function of sight for Thomas's belief before explaining the blessed nature of

²⁵ Bownde, *Vnbeleefe*, 25, cited in Hoffmann, 'Atheism', 50.

²⁶ Bownde, *Vnbeleefe*, 26, cited in Hoffmann, 'Atheism', 50.

²⁷ Bownde, *Vnbeleefe*, 1–2. I have been unable to identify the Bible translation used by Bownde.

²⁸ Space precludes discussion of several other important themes which could prove fruitful in further research on the post-Reformation period. For example, the significance of spatiality, temporality, presence and absence in the scriptural text of the Thomas episode has been explored in considerable depth by Most, *Doubting Thomas*, 43–68.

²⁹ Bownde, *Vnbeleefe*, 1–2.

those ‘that haue not seene, and haue beleueed’.³⁰ In conjunction with this stress on seeing is a focus on touch, specifically Thomas’s demand to ‘put my finger into the print of the nayles, and put mine hand into his side’.³¹ However, the key emphasis here, both in the scriptural narrative and in Bownde’s treatment of the passage, is on the primacy of faith over both sight and touch as the true means of believing in the resurrection of Christ. Yet John’s Gospel suggests that sensory perception is the only means by which Thomas is initially prepared to believe in Christ’s resurrected presence, and whatever he may prescribe for other believers, Christ is apparently willing to let Thomas see, and perhaps even touch, for himself.³²

The object toward which the senses were being directed is also significant, namely Christ’s body and his wounds. John’s Gospel reports, as quoted by Bownde, that Christ ‘stood in the middes’ of the disciples, highlighting not just his presence in the room but his centrality to the scene.³³ Finally, the passage introduces readers to a conceptual relationship between being ‘faithful’ and ‘faithless’. A sense of abrupt antithesis is established when Christ tells Thomas to be ‘be not faithlesse but faithfull’.³⁴ However, the use of this language also reflects a sense in which faith is predicated on the logical possibility of unbelief. Alec Ryrie has suggested that this same ‘symbiotic’ relationship can be argued to have contributed to the formation of perceptions of religious doubt among theologians and religious writers in early modern England.³⁵ This engagement with unbelief, both in the Bible and in subsequent religious discourse, suggests that the concept was credible and even necessary during the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² For a discussion of conflicting early modern perspectives on whether Thomas did in fact touch Christ in the narrative, see Most, *Doubting Thomas*, 145–54.

³³ Bownde, *Vnbeleefe*, 1.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Alec Ryrie, ‘Faith, Doubt, and the Problem of Atheism in Reformation Britain’, paper presented to the History of Christianity seminar, Cambridge, 20 November 2013. I am indebted to the author for allowing me to make use of this paper.

period. The themes of sensory perception and the physical body are central to the narrative of Thomas's doubts and reinforce the idea of unbelief as informed by tangible reality. Bownde drew upon these themes in his writing in order to construct a framework for discussing and dealing with unbelief among contemporaries.

Bownde was acutely aware of the significance of sight and touch in Scripture. While John suggests that the other apostles relied largely on sight, Bownde's text drew attention to Thomas's unique role in introducing touch as a conduit for belief. Bownde celebrated Christ's 'wisdom and goodness' in reappearing to Thomas, and presented touch as integral to the meaning of Christ's 'second and more sensible apparition: when they should not onely see againe the print of the nailes in his hands, but for Thomas also to put his finger into them'.³⁶ Bownde's decision to place Thomas's interactions with the resurrected Christ, which in the Gospel of John were based on both sight and touch, in the context of the earlier apostolic experiences of the resurrection, which in all four gospels had focused predominantly on sight and word of mouth, reflects the importance of touch for Bownde's analysis of the narrative. However, Bownde also suggested that there was an interactive relationship between Thomas and the divine, in the context of which Thomas demanded that two of his senses be satisfied before he would believe, and Christ appeared willing to oblige him. Bownde went on to highlight Thomas's unwillingness to believe the words of the many other witnesses to Christ's resurrection, explaining:

all the rest tell him, what they had seene, namely, not onely Christ in some forme, but so certainly that he spake unto them, and shewed them his hands and his feete, and the print of the nayles in them, so that they could not possibly be deceived in so cleare a matter: yet for all this he not onely not giueth credit unto some one of them seuerally, but not vnto all of them joyntly, beeing so many, and so credible witnesses: and further, is so wilfull and obstinate, and so addicted to his owne senses and feeling,

³⁶ Bownde, *Vnbeleefe*, 23.

that he tells them plainly, that unles he himselfe see the print of the nayles in his hands, and may put his finger into them; and the print of the speare in his side, and may put his hand into that, he will never beleeeue it.³⁷

This passage reinforces the integral importance of the senses to Bownde's ideas about how unbelief functioned, and in particular Thomas's prioritizing of his own responses to the external world over the primacy of faith as the necessary component for belief. From this, it can be inferred that Bownde saw the reliance on sensory perception not merely as a symptom of doubt but as a fundamental foundation for unbelief and the cause of Thomas's denial of Christ's resurrection. Bownde also reiterated the phrases concerning Thomas's request to put his finger and hand into the prints of the nails and spear, phrases to which he returned throughout his text.

As with much early modern Protestant writing, this repetition reflects a desire to centre theological ideas and guidance as closely as possible on Scripture. This passage also recalls John's earlier account of the piercing of Christ's side at the crucifixion (19: 34) by making direct reference to the spear. While the wound caused by the spear is referred to again during the scriptural narrative of Thomas's unbelief, Bownde focused not only on Christ's wounds, but also on the objects that made them and on Thomas's interactions with the injuries, in order to reinforce the physicality of Thomas's actions and to describe Christ's body in great detail.³⁸ This fascination with the body suggests that Bownde perceived the relationship between Thomas's senses and Christ's body as central both to the narrative and also to understanding the nature of contemporary unbelief.

Bownde provided numerous criticisms of a sensory approach to belief, taking Thomas's reliance on the senses to a hypothetical extreme in order to highlight the limitations

³⁷ Ibid. 23–4.

³⁸ See also *ibid.* 21, 85.

of the senses for believing. Why, asked Bownde, if the senses were truly important for belief, should the opportunity to see and feel Christ directly not be extended to all believers:

why may not other be of the same minde too? and so Christ should have remained upon the earth unto this day, and not have ascended into heaven: or els often since he should have descended to shew himselfe to those that should beleeeue: if none would beleeeue further then they should see and feele. Moreover after that he had thus seen him and felt him himselfe, would he not have thought it strange, if others would not have beleeeued him, when he preached unto them the resurrection of Christ? why then doth he make such a straight rule to himselfe?³⁹

Bownde also stressed the deceptive nature of the senses, asking: ‘Are these two senses such sure judges of the truth, that they cannot be deceived? May not a man thinke, that he seeth and feeleth that, which he doth not? and may he not againe doubt, whether he seeth and feeleth that, which indeede he doth?’⁴⁰ He examined biblical examples of sensory deception, such as the misinterpreted miraculous provision of water performed by Elisha (2 Kgs 3: 1–27) and Isaac’s confusing his sons Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27: 17–46), before explaining: ‘Thus wee see that sight and feeling may easily be deceived: and yet this is the nature of vnbeleefe, to give credit more unto these deceiveable senses, then to many other things, that are most sure and certaine. And many men in matters of faith will almost beleeeue nothing, untill such time, as they see and feele them’.⁴¹

Bownde’s approach reflects his perception that unbelief was generated by too strong an emphasis on the potentially limited and deceptive senses and too weak an emphasis on faith, and his conviction that the senses were to be rejected in favour of faith in God as the

³⁹ Ibid. 87–8.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 88.

⁴¹ Ibid. 90.

proper means to believe. He underscored the seriousness of the underlying problem by exploring the implications of his argument in the context of divine judgement, stating: ‘and therefore when they are taught what in heaven is prepared for them that serve God; what in hell for them that disobey him: they are readie to say, who hath seen them? giving us to understand, that they will not beleeeue them, until they either see them, or feele them themselves’.⁴²

It is apparent, then, that Bownde saw sensory perception as a source of considerable disruption, potentially undermining an individual’s faith and jeopardizing their salvation. Here Thomas’s unbelief is used to argue that reliance on the senses in matters of religion could have dramatic spiritual repercussions after death. Bownde saw the senses as a barrier to the individual’s search for assurance, a source of distraction from godly behaviour and a sinful diversion from salvation. Those who, like Thomas, experienced unbelief relied on the senses in order to believe, but it was this very reliance that limited a true, faith-based engagement with God. Indeed, Bownde argued that the senses caused individuals to ignore the providential ‘threatenings’ and ‘promises’ delivered by divine will.⁴³

However, dependence on the senses and the resulting unbelief did not inevitably lead to damnation. Bownde’s text was aimed at dissuading people from trusting this sensory religion and comforting those afflicted with unbelief precisely by locating the solution to the problem in the context of predestination and divine punishment rather than in human assumptions. ‘But also if we will examine our selues, & other men’, Bownde argued, the community of believers would find ‘[t]hat though we had often heard that God was just, and would punish sin, yet we presumed otherwise, and did not believe it, because we escaped a while in our sinnes, and did not see and feele the truth of it in ourselves’.⁴⁴ It was only internally through self-examination, or through shared exchanges between the godly, that

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 93.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 96–7.

feeling could be used in order to believe. Such an inward-looking approach would reveal the truth of divine justice and punishment, judgement and salvation. Bownde was keen to associate true belief with the non-physical and to contrast spiritual, faith-based belief with the idea that unbelief was intensely physical and orientated around the body. For Bownde, ‘there is no condemnation to them, that are in Christ Jesus, which walke not after the flesh, but after the spirit’ (Romans 8: 1).⁴⁵

While the focus of the scriptural narrative was on Christ’s body, Bownde also suggested that the encounter with Christ was necessary because the wounds of unbelief afflicting the body required healing through the senses. Bownde quite frequently described unbelief in medical terms, with Christ’s physical demonstration of renewed life serving as medication against the corrupting influence of doubt among the apostles:

So that Christ in shewing them his hands and feete, that so they might be ridde of those thoughts and doubts, that hindred them from beleeuing; did manifestly shew, that he knew the thoughts of their hearts to be these, that unlesse they saw in his hands and feete the print of the nayles, they would not beleeeue that it was he. Christ therefore like a skilful physician of their soules did applie his medicine according to their maladie; and therefore when as at his first apparition he did shew unto them his hands and his feete, he doing all things in wisdom and to some good purpose, did thereby declare, what thoughts of vnbeleefe they were troubled with.⁴⁶

This language was not unique to Bownde. References to Christ as a ‘physician of the soul’ can be found in the late fourth-century work of Gregory Nazianzus, and subsequently in the writing of Gregory the Great, as well as in the post-Reformation period from the 1570s

⁴⁵ Ibid. 101.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 31–2.

into the mid-seventeenth century.⁴⁷ The metaphor focuses on the spiritual dimension of belief, suggesting the soul rather than the body as the means through which Christ was able to encourage belief among the apostles. Nonetheless, Bownde's use of this simile evokes a strong sense of unbelief as a corporeal state that required an equally physical remedy. This is very similar to the way that works of practical divinity tried to address anxiety, melancholy and other emotional afflictions which, alongside unbelief, were characterized as useful opportunities to reassert godliness and reinforce belief itself.⁴⁸

Elsewhere Bownde referred to other passages of Scripture which referred to salvation in terms of physical healing. For instance, commenting on Philippians 3: 20–1: 'Our conuersation is in heaven, from whence also we looke for the Saviour, even the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall chaunge our vile bodie, that it may be fashioned like vnto his glorious bodie, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things vnto himselfe',⁴⁹ While Bownde's text sought to dissuade believers from placing excessive reliance on their senses in their engagement with faith, he nonetheless acknowledged that Christ's mercy could manifest itself physically in order to confront unbelief. Bownde explained that 'we must take heede, how we yield to our vnbeleef: for it will make vs looke for and desire such things at the hand of God, for the confirming of our faith, as haue no ground either from Scripture, or from reason'.⁵⁰ Bownde also acknowledged that 'it pleaseth God of his infinite goodnes to beare with men sometimes this way; and to yield to them, either to the strengthening of their faith, or to the leauing of them without excuse in their vnbeleefe'.⁵¹ His text aimed to comfort those experiencing doubt and unbelief, but he also recognized the expectations of physical and

⁴⁷ Allen, 'Nicholas Bownde', 104 n. 85; David Harley, 'Medical Metaphors in English Moral Theology, 1560–1660', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 48 (1993), 396–435, at 400 n. 21.

⁴⁸ Parker and Carlson, 'Practical Divinity', 87–96.

⁴⁹ As cited in Bownde, *Vnbeleefe*, 160–1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 162.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 162–3.

sensory experience among individual believers, as well as the centrality of healing to the experience of God. His work was thus particularly suited to the dual purpose of assuaging spiritual anxiety and rectifying unbelief, both of which were necessary aspects of Reformed religion.

Just as unbelief was a ‘maladie’ to be healed, so the experience of faith was analogous to good health in the body. In a striking passage, Bownde compared belief in Christ to the physical experience of pregnancy:

For as the woman that is quickned with child, and feeleth it stirre in her bodie, though shee doe not alwaies feele it stirre alike; and sometimes not at all, and sometimes more weakely then before: yet shee assures her selfe, that the child is living, because shee hath felt it stirre before, & so hopeth that shee shall doe againe. So when Christ is formed in us first of all, as the Apostle speaketh, we have the feeling of him stirring and mooving in our hearts by his holy Spirit, dwelling in us: which lively motions though wee feele not strongly mooving in us afterwards, or not at all; yet we doubt not, but that Christ dwelleth in our hearts by faith still, and hope to feele it as sensibly againe in time, as we have done: & so much the more, because Christ beeing formed in us, never dieth: and therefore the remembrance of our former Feelings must comfort us over the want of them for the time present: for they are not alwaies alike in any that have them: it is sufficient that we have had them, therefore if we labour after them, they will returne unto us againe, when it shall please God. And thus much for this, that S. Thomas in this matter of faith addicts himselfe to his owne feeling.⁵²

This passage has fascinating implications for scholarly understanding of the ways in which belief and unbelief were perceived in early modern thought. Bownde acknowledged the widespread dilemma faced by Christians: that they could not always feel the presence of the

⁵² Ibid. 155–6.

spirit of Christ. He reasserted the importance of faith over physical feeling, arguing that in spite of the lack of continuous spiritual ‘feeling’ within believers, once they had experienced faith, ‘we doubt not, but that Christ dwelleth in our hearts by faith still’.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this passage lies in its comparison between belief in Christ and belief in the living presence of an unborn child. For Bownde, continuous belief in the presence of Christ was not determined by seeing or touching his body, or by ‘feeling’ his ‘stirring and moouing’, any more than belief in the presence of one’s unborn child was determined by feeling it kick all the time. Nonetheless, Bownde’s language strongly implies that he saw belief and unbelief as closely linked to and comparable with sensations in the body. The pregnant woman in the passage may not feel her child stir at this moment, but ‘shee hath felt it stirre before, & so hopeth that shee shall doe againe’, just as believers who did not presently feel Christ’s presence ‘hope to feelee it as sensibly againe in time’. He went on to reinforce these appeals to memory and hope of sensation, implying that ‘feelings’, whether physical or psychological, were by no means beside the point and could serve as useful reminders of God’s power. With this parallel, Bownde was making a direct comparison between the way in which believers engaged with and experienced Christ and the physical experience of pregnancy. Though figurative, the association remains significant because it suggests that faith-based belief was not totally divorced from notions of physical ‘feeling’ in the minds of early modern religious writers. Moreover, the language of maternity used here recalls Mary, while the unborn child in whom the mother must unwaveringly believe is directly compared with Christ, who in turn is ‘formed in us’. In this way, Bownde characterized belief through faith as an example of fertility and healthy new life while simultaneously approaching unbelief as an affliction in the body. Both were internal and profoundly personal experiences that drew physical feelings and sensory experiences together with spirituality. Unbelief was a malady characterized by the search for sensory confirmation of God, an ill-informed pursuit that Christ was nonetheless able to satisfy and thus remedy among the apostles. However, works of practical divinity such as Bownde’s text suggest that

this spiritual affliction also lay at the heart of belief itself, because grappling with doubt and unbelief was a necessary aspect of introspective godly religion.

Even as Bownde was stressing the importance of faith over physicality and sensory perception, he was providing his readers with linguistic devices and articulating ideas that firmly located unbelief in a physical context. This raises something of a paradox for scholarly understandings of post-Reformation religion. For Bownde, physicality necessarily informed the process by which Thomas expressed his unbelief and subsequently embraced the truth of Christ's resurrection. Bownde's work reflects the idea that unbelief was an affliction in the souls of the apostles that the medicine of Christ's wounded body had cured, while belief could be illustrated by maternal faith in the unborn child, present but largely invisible in the body and mind of the true Christian. Crucially, Bownde's conception of unbelief was linked to the physical and could not be adequately discussed or dealt with through the conceptual theology of faith alone. Thus both doubt and unbelief joined those anxieties and emotional distresses triggered by belief itself as physical afflictions that required pastoral comfort.

Post-Reformation treatments of the Thomas narrative provide a unique window into these afflictions, allowing scholars better to understand the role of unbelief among both divines and their readers. While it is often difficult to trace the intimate religious concerns of individuals, a number of studies have also sought to suggest the relationships between doubt, unbelief and true belief in self-articulated accounts. Crucially, Bownde's approach to the unbelief of Thomas helps to illuminate the nature of the 'symbiosis' highlighted by Alec Ryrie between belief and unbelief during the post-Reformation period, wherein individuals sought to reconcile their doubtful and irreligious thoughts with the Protestant faith.⁵³ For Bownde, faith could be strengthened through the honest acknowledgement and pastoral correction of doubtful thoughts and particular instances of unbelief. His writing reaffirms the

⁵³ Ryrie, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Problem of Atheism'. The close links between doubt, voluntarism and hostility towards atheism have also been explored by Hoffmann, 'Atheism'.

suggestion that doubt was not always an abstract enemy or the antithetical 'other', but a recurring presence and a component of belief in the minds of individual believers.

Bownde's discussion of Thomas represents a revealing intersection between the unbelief faced by individuals and the changing nature of theology during the period, underlining the importance of materiality as a potential prelude to doubt and unbelief. Bownde's text demonstrates that this approach to unbelief, which sees various forms of irreligion as rooted in the physical and sensory world, can also contribute to historical understanding of Calvinist theology and its relationship to individual believers in the post-Reformation period. Alongside his vociferous emphasis on the importance of faith for belief, Bownde's approach to doubt was not hostile to the senses or the body. Rather, he invoked the narrative of Thomas to address the nature of unbelief in the minds and bodies of his contemporaries and relied upon the language of sensory perception and physicality to conduct a dialogue of spiritual and bodily comfort with the individual.