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Demons of the Mind: Satanic Thoughts in Seventeenth-Century England

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Biographical Note

Darren Oldridge is Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Worcester. He is the author of numerous books and articles on religion and the supernatural in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most recently *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England* (Routledge: 2016). He is presently editing the third edition of *The Witchcraft Reader* (Routledge: Forthcoming).

Abstract

This article explores the widespread belief in Stuart England that the Devil could intrude thoughts into the human mind. Drawing on medical and religious literature, it argues that this idea was accepted throughout the seventeenth century, and remained largely unchallenged by naturalistic theories of mental illness. Indeed, contemporaries often combined demonic and physiological explanations for conditions such as "melancholy". The article argues that the concept of satanic thoughts survived because it was consistent with wider aspects of Protestant doctrine, and its effects were socially and politically unthreatening. Finally, it considers the relationship between the early modern belief in satanic incursions in the mind and modern understandings of mental health.

Key words

Devil, health, melancholy, mind, religion

It was a "matter not questioned", noted the West Country minister William Chilcot in 1698, that "Satan can throw wicked thoughts into our minds".¹ Chilcot's assertion was well founded. The belief that supernatural agents – most often demons but occasionally angels – could place ideas in the human mind was widely accepted in seventeenth-century Protestant theological and devotional literature, and described at first hand in spiritual autobiographies. In perhaps the most famous example, John Bunyan identified the sacrilegious thoughts that assailed him in *Grace*

Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666) as satanic incursions in his consciousness.² The possibility of such cognitive invasions was also accepted by experts on mental health, who acknowledged that the internal and physical causes of “distraction” worked alongside external and spiritual ones, often in complex and reciprocal ways. It was “not to be doubted”, wrote the Surrey physician David Irish in 1700, that the Devil “hath spiritual access into our spirits to trouble them, and disorder their operations”.³

Such ideas were grounded in the larger context of early modern demonology, which accorded evil spirits considerable powers within nature, under divine providence, including the ability to manipulate the human mind. In their essentials these beliefs were accepted by educated people across western Europe, and by Catholics and Protestants alike.⁴ They were rooted in the common inheritance and authority of scripture, which contained frequent references to the activity of demons. To most modern westerners, however, the kind of mental intrusions described by people like Bunyan have quite different connotations. They are associated with disorders of the mind. Unwanted and distressing ideas are characteristic of obsessive compulsive disorders, in which sufferers cannot repress unbidden thoughts that provoke anxiety and compel their behaviour. In more extreme cases, the belief that an external power has placed thoughts inside a subject's mind is recognised as a sign of schizophrenia. Indeed, psychiatrists in Europe and North America view “thought insertion” as a first rank symptom of the disease. Such symptoms can be used to confirm a diagnosis. According to the standard manual of psychopathology, *Sims' Symptoms in the Mind* (5th ed. 2015), the phenomenon typifies the schizophrenic experience of cognitive passivity, in which the patient perceives “his thoughts as foreign or alien, not emanating from himself and not within his control”. When this experience

occurs with reasonable frequency, and no organic cause for it can be found, it is viewed as a reliable indicator that the subject suffers from the condition.⁵

It is hard to imagine a more striking discontinuity between the assumptions of early modern people and ourselves. An experience that belonged within the conventional understanding of seventeenth-century English Protestants is now taken as a sign of mental illness. This difference illustrates, in a particularly acute way, the gap between a world of immanent spiritual experience and the secular preconceptions of contemporary western cultures. The philosopher Charles Taylor has attempted to define this difference with regard to ideas of selfhood. According to Taylor, pre-modern people believed their minds to be open to active external powers: objects charged with magical or religious influence, good and bad spirits, and the direct interventions of God. Their minds were porous, or “unbuffered”. The emergence of a fully insulated or “buffered” sense of self was, for Taylor, an important step towards the secular world. Before this step was taken, however, the sway of invisible agents on the mind was a largely unchallenged “fact of experience”.⁶

It is possible to detect in seventeenth-century England some tendencies that encouraged the transition towards a more insulated sense of self. These included the marked scepticism of the early Stuart church towards demonic possession, and the concomitant development of physical and psychological explanations for the condition.⁷ After the civil wars, this was combined with the reaction against divine inspiration associated with religious “enthusiasm”, and the emergence in some quarters of scientific naturalism. More broadly, the dramatic expansion of medicine in the period brought more people into contact with physiological theories of illness, including

disorders of the mind.⁸ Within this context, it is striking that the belief in demonic thoughts remained largely unchallenged. The first part of this article will show the remarkable endurance of the idea. The assumption that the Devil could intrude foreign thoughts – or “injections” – directly into human consciousness was common throughout the period. It was not undermined by medical theories: on the contrary, it was often combined with them. The second part seeks to explain the prevalence of the idea. It argues that it was accepted for both intellectual and political reasons. The belief in satanic injections was part of a larger concern with temptation that was integral to the later Reformation, and could be accommodated easily within the providential framework of Restoration science. The effects of the idea were also conservative, and therefore largely uncontroversial. Unlike other forms of spiritual communication – such as prophecy or revelations in dreams – belief in demonic thoughts tended to support rather than challenge established institutions. Lastly, the article will address the wider questions raised by the phenomenon. How did the experiences of people such as John Bunyan relate to modern theories of psychopathology, and should these theories be expanded in the light of the seventeenth-century evidence?

In 1586 the physician Timothy Bright presented an extended discussion of the mental disturbances associated with “melancholy”. Bright defined this affliction as “a certain fearful disposition of the mind”. Its victims experienced an extreme and groundless sense of anxiety, and were often troubled by despairing thoughts that were contrary to reason. Bright’s analysis of the condition reflected his interest both in medicine and theology: he was later ordained as a minister in the Church of England. In explaining the bodily causes of melancholy, which constituted the bulk of his text, he followed conventional medical theories: aberrant feelings and thoughts were caused by a surfeit of black bile and the action of “animal spirits” associated with strong emotions. Bright also acknowledged the role of the Devil in unnatural thoughts. In particular, he noted Satan's capacity to suggest ideas that were contrary to his victim's normal inclinations: these included “certain blasphemies”, suicidal thoughts, and the irrational desire to harm others. Despite the “universal corruption” of humankind, these impulses did not express the innate sinfulness of their victims: rather, they were experienced as alien desires by individuals that abhorred “the least conceit of them”, and found “no part of their nature to incline unto them”.⁹

In effect, Bright proposed two explanations for the symptoms of melancholy: one of them was physiological and the other spiritual. The former diagnosis, additionally, could also have a demonic aspect. This was because Satan, like God, could act through secondary causes. It was widely assumed that evil spirits exploited the properties of black bile – an idea conveyed in the description of the humour as “the Devil's bath”. As the pamphleteer George Hall observed in

1653, “the presence of the Devil may consist with the presence of a disease and evil humour, and with the efficacy of means”.¹⁰ Bright himself implied that the enemy not only induced the symptoms of melancholy through direct interventions, but also set in train its organic causes. The illness, he wrote, was “like a weapon taken into Satan's hand, and used to all advantages of our hurt and destruction”.¹¹

A similar balance between the organic and spiritual causes of mental disorder was evident in the work of Robert Burton, perhaps the most important Stuart writer on the subject. Like Bright, Burton tended to emphasise the physiological and emotional origins of melancholy, while also acknowledging its spiritual aspects. Indeed, he consistently stressed the natural basis of the condition in order to put its victims at ease.¹² Sufferers would, he hoped, put aside the fear that they were bewitched or abandoned by God once they understood the “inward and natural causes” of their affliction.¹³ This strategy was limited, however, by Burton's belief that evil spirits could plant thoughts directly in human minds. These thoughts were so monstrous that they shocked their recipients, and were utterly foreign to their normal disposition. “The Devil”, he wrote, “commonly suggests things opposite to nature, opposite to God and His word, impious, absurd, such as a man would never of himself, or could not conceive”.¹⁴ Burton also affirmed that Satan used black bile as a secondary cause in his operations. When he did not interfere immediately in human consciousness, he used the humour as “his ordinary engine” for inducing despair.¹⁵

This nexus of natural and otherworldly causes of mental disturbance was accepted in the later seventeenth century. When the Surrey gentlewoman Joan Drake was diagnosed with melancholy in the 1620s, her affliction was understood as an organic disease exploited by the Devil.¹⁶ In the

two pamphlets describing the case in 1647 and 1654, the onset of her condition was presented in medical terms while its escalation involved the direct action of evil spirits. In 1641 John Spencer distinguished between the natural and preternatural causes of melancholy.¹⁷ Among the latter were “the evil thoughts and wicked suggestions” of Satan. “Learned physicians”, wrote George Hall in the 1650s, “think that the Devil is frequently mixed with such distempers, and hath a main hand in many of their symptoms”.¹⁸ In his *Compleat and Compendious Church History* (1680), Christopher Ness observed that Satan incited and rejoiced in mental instability.¹⁹ The physician David Irish described the intimate involvement of the Devil in this affliction in 1700. As a spiritual creature, he noted, Satan could manipulate the animal spirits of men and women to create “molestations” of the mind.²⁰

While medical authorities acknowledged the direct interventions of the Devil in human consciousness, and explained the physical processes by which he could otherwise “trouble the quiet seat of the mind”, it was accepted that the remedies for his incursions involved religion as well as physic.²¹ Unsurprisingly, the phenomenon was discussed most often in works of practical divinity. In his catechism of 1548, Thomas Cranmer warned that the enemy “can set our hearts afire so suddenly . . . that we shall not know from whence such sudden fire and sparks do come”.²² The great Calvinist theologian William Perkins restated the danger. “The Devil”, Perkins wrote, “doth mightily assault some men by casting into their minds most fearful motions of blasphemy”.²³ These sixteenth-century writers established the framework for describing demonic thoughts, and distinguishing them from ordinary cognitions. In terms of their content, they were shocking and unnatural, and often involved a powerful impulse to do evil. Their appearance in the mind was equally abnormal: they rushed fiercely and irresistibly

into consciousness – as “vehement movements”, in Cranmer's words. These qualities affected the crucial issue of responsibility. As sudden and alarming invaders, demonic ideas did not belong to their hosts. In a phrase repeated often in the 1600s, they “were set upon the Devil's score” – though their recipients were culpable if they allowed the enemy's thoughts to settle and grow in their imaginations, or chose to act upon them.²⁴

Perhaps the most detailed treatment of these ideas in the seventeenth century was provided by the Northamptonshire minister Robert Bolton, in a series of works aimed to assist godly Christians in their combat with temptation. Bolton reaffirmed the established facts about demonic cognitions: they were hideously unnatural in content, and blasted the mind like “lightning flashes”.²⁵ He also noted the Devil's use of secondary causes to assault the mind. It was sometimes the practice of evil spirits, he observed, to stir “affrighting distempers . . . from the dark mists of a melancholic humour in the brain”. For Bolton, the minds of the godly were especially prone to both kinds of attack, as the spiritual enemy was determined to torment and overthrow them. The “holiest men are Satan's special mark, that he would gladliest hit with his fiery darts”. Here Bolton followed the conventional logic of providence in addressing such matters: the Devil sought to destroy God's children out of hatred, and God permitted his assaults “for some secret holy end”. This knowledge, he hoped, would help the faithful to endure these strange incursions, and treat them as a providential cross to bear rather than a sign of damnation.²⁶

In a devotional treatise published posthumously in 1634, Bolton addressed words of consolation to the sufferers of intense and recurrent demonic thoughts. These began with a searing

description of the experience, which indicates the author's assumptions about the Devil's mental assaults:

Art thou vexed to the heart and fearfully haunted with some horrible and hateful injections of Satan, thoughts framed by himself immediately, and put into thee, perhaps tending to atheism, or to the dishonour of God in some high degree, or to the disgrace of His word, or self-destruction, or the like? Thoughts which thou canst not remember without horror, and darest not reveal or name, for their strange and prodigious hatefulnesse? ²⁷

This depiction conveyed both the extreme nature of satanic ideas and their tendency to horrify their recipients. The latter quality was desirable, as it indicated the abnormality of the thoughts and the refusal of their victims to accept them; but it also contributed to the trauma of the experience. Bolton sought to relieve this trauma in two ways. First, he reminded his readers that they were not alone: Satan's "hateful injections" were a common affliction of the godly. As there was no shame in the experience, it was appropriate to seek company and support from other Christians, and not retreat into solitary contemplation.²⁸ Secondly, he reassured the victims of demonic thoughts that the horror they produced was a sign of their unbidden and unwelcome nature, and as a consequence they would not count against them in the eyes of God: "if thine heart rise against, abominate, abandon, grieve, and be humbled for them, they shall never be laid to thy charge, but set on Satan's score." ²⁹

This advice was probably most consoling when the Devil's "injections" were obviously blasphemous, and inspired an immediate sense of shock and revulsion in the victim's mind. There was one kind of demonic assault that was more insidious, however. In cases of "holy

desperation” – or “religious melancholy”, as it was sometimes described in Stuart England – the Devil hijacked the normal conventions of Protestant piety to produce unwarranted feelings of despair.³⁰ He did so by his usual methods, but timed his interventions to exploit the natural feelings of unworthiness before God that all Christians would sometimes experience. It was a given of reformed religion that individuals could not work towards their own salvation: rather, all unredeemed men and women were destined by right for Hell, and retrieved only through the saving mercy of God. The acceptance of this truth was a normal part of the conversion experience, and one that was actively encouraged by godly ministers. As Alec Ryrie has noted, “salvation anxiety” was a common experience for English Protestants, and one that sat close to the gift of divine grace. Indeed, the belief that redemption brought individuals to a painful awareness of their unworthiness for such a gift was the “paradox at Protestantism’s heart”, and one with unavoidable pastoral consequences.³¹ In cases of religious despair, the believer’s ordinary sense of undeservedness before God could harden into the conviction that they could never be saved. It was precisely this idea that Satan sometimes nourished, or placed directly into vulnerable minds.

Unsurprisingly, evil spirits featured often in Stuart texts on the condition. In *Physicke to Cure the Most Dangerous Disease of Desperation* (1605), William Wilymat commended the opinion of St Gregory on the matter: “one cause of desperation, and not the least, but rather the primary and principal cause of all other, ariseth from the subtle, cunning, and cozening counsel, inducement, persuasion, and allurement of the Devil.” This did not, of course, preclude other explanations. Religious despair might arise from organic causes, or from the psychological effects of severe self-examination; it could even derive from the over-zealous preaching of godly

clergy, as some contemporaries alleged. For Wilymat and most later writers, Satan's "inducements" to desperation took various forms, and frequently acted in tandem. He could molest the mind directly with "crafty suggestions", or cultivate anxiety through excessive contemplation of "God's severe threatenings against sin".³² As with his other operations, the adversary often combined the indirect action of bodily humours and animal spirits with immediate promptings to despair.

Satan's exploitation of religious anxiety was uncommonly devious, and required a delicate pastoral response. Godly ministers encouraged men and women to recognise and deplore their fallen nature, while guarding against extreme (and possibly demonic) feelings of spiritual unworthiness. For Robert Bolton, it was essential for individuals to be "soundly humbled for sin"; but this painful experience should prepare them for "the refreshing dew and doctrine of the gospel", which promised salvation despite their innate corruption. The second step was vital, as the Devil would "labour mightily by his lying suggestions" to detain them "in perpetual horror" at their sins.³³ In 1651 the Kentish pastor John Durant noted the special problems posed by demonic promptings to religious despair. They appeared to confirm, rather than oppose, the insights of a Christian conscience – but they drove these insights to a deadly conclusion. At the Devil's careful prompting, the godly might find their own consciences perversely aligned with destructive thoughts. To combat this stratagem, Durant reminded his readers that even the "conscience of the godly" could err, and "create trouble when there is no cause". They should not let "Satan's suggestions" convince them they were damned, even if this prospect seemed consistent with their religious convictions.³⁴

Later writers repeated and developed these themes. In 1671 Richard Baxter published a treatise to help Christians cast down with “dismal apprehensions that they are miserable, undone creatures”. He claimed that this condition was normally fostered by worldly misfortune rather than excessive religious speculation, and was exacerbated by demonic suggestions to blasphemy and self-harm.³⁵ Twenty years later, Timothy Rogers compiled a collection of letters written by godly divines to assist melancholy Christians. Several of these described the Devil's instigation of doubts about God's mercy. One text, addressed to a relative of the author, warned of the “severe and malignant suggestions of Satan against the mercifulness and goodness of God”. In his guidance to the afflicted woman, the author echoed the advice of William Perkins a hundred years earlier: “if such thoughts come into your mind, cast them out presently, and raise up your mind unto a detestation of them.”³⁶ In *A Practical Treatise Concerning Evil Thoughts* (1698), William Chilcot described the Devil's desire to instill falsely in others his own sense of deserved damnation:

'Tis the stratagem of the accursed enemy of our peace, who takes advantage perhaps of the weakness and tenderness of thy spirits, caused by some bodily indisposition or other, to inject dreadful thoughts representing Almighty God as an implacable judge, endeavouring to make him seem the same to us that he is to himself.³⁷

The physician David Irish repeated this observation in 1700. He advised the sufferers of religious melancholy to “consider whether you are not under some temptation [rather] than, as you imagine, God's anger”.³⁸

The analysis of Satan's cognitive interventions by William Chilcot, and the ministers whose advice was collected by Timothy Rogers, was essentially the same as that of Robert Bolton sixty years earlier; and all of them echoed ideas developed in the sixteenth century. The longevity of these beliefs owed much to the theology of English Protestantism, and the various ways in which this was enacted in real life situations. These themes are considered below.

II

The Devil of the English Reformation was preeminently a spirit of temptation operating under divine providence. These qualities provided the intellectual bedrock for the concept of demonic “injections”. Recent studies of diabolology in early modern England have agreed that invisible temptation was emphasised more strongly than outward manifestations of demonic activity.³⁹ In part, this reflected the interior spirituality that characterized reformed faith: an unmediated relationship with God entailed an immediate experience of the spiritual adversary. The abolition of baptismal exorcism, and the various sacramental defences against demons available within the medieval church, complemented and encouraged this process. At the same time, the experience of confessional conflict tended to amplify Satan’s role as a spiritual deceiver. As the hidden mastermind of false religion of all kinds, he was commonly portrayed as an insidious tempter to error and the “father of lies”.⁴⁰ As Nathan Johnstone has noted, this spiritualized view of the enemy encouraged a distinctive form of Protestant ministry: the clergy assumed “a new role as adepts able to mediate the correct response to temptation to their parishioners and, through their published writings, to society more widely”.⁴¹

The idea of demonic interventions in the mind was one aspect of this larger enterprise. Godly writers normally stressed human corruption in the context of temptation: men and women were inclined by their fallen nature to sin, and their “spiritual blindness” made them easy targets for the Devil’s deceptions. But the struggle against evil thoughts still required an understanding of Satan’s strategies to exploit human weakness. According to the Staffordshire minister John Ball, the “root of evil cogitations is the corrupt heart, which is sufficient to poison the whole man with all kinds of wickedness”. Nonetheless, “Satan spareth not to inject evil motions into the heart, as oil into the flame, to make it more vehement and dangerous”.⁴² In *An Historical Anatomy of Christian Melancholy* (1646), Edmund Gregory observed that impious thoughts flowed naturally “from our sin-corrupted souls”; but he also noted the possibility that “the Devil hath his hand in them”.⁴³ John Durant observed in 1651 that natural corruption was “never totally in this life mortified”, even among members of the elect, and the Devil would sometimes intrude wicked thoughts to take advantage of this fact. “Satan may dog you and haunt you”, he wrote, “and put hard and blasphemous thoughts into you”; but these would only succeed if they stirred the corrupted inclinations of the mind.⁴⁴ Such subtle operations were targeted especially at godly Christians, as Robert Bolton and other divines observed. As such, Satan’s “injections” were a matter of importance in pastoral theology.

The phenomenon also sat comfortably with the doctrine of divine providence. This set limits on the Devil’s capacity to vex mortals with mental incursions, and ensured that they always served the higher purposes of God. Additionally, the providential view of the world assumed that supernatural agents worked through both direct and secondary causes. This aspect of the doctrine was important to medical science, as it allowed God to operate through the ordinary

processes of the body as well as supernatural interventions.⁴⁵ In the case of demonic manipulations of the mind, it also allowed for considerable flexibility in the interpretation of Satan's activity: with divine permission, the enemy could assail human consciousness directly or through organic causes, or a combination of both. This prevented the Devil from being written out of naturalistic theories of the mind. As early as 1631, Robert Bolton moved between organic and purely spiritual explanations of demonic thoughts: Satan's "injections" were normally immediate interventions, but occasionally occurred through the secondary action of black bile.⁴⁶ Richard Baxter had the Devil working solely through organic methods in 1671, while the effects he produced were the same as those described by earlier writers: his victims were compelled, "as if it were by something else within them, to say some blasphemous word against God or do some mischief against themselves".⁴⁷ Similarly, the letters of advice to melancholy Christians compiled by Timothy Rogers assumed that Satan used organic processes to "raise strange storms and tempests" in the mind.⁴⁸ In 1698 William Chilcot suggested that the Devil employed both physical and spiritual means to implant "wicked thoughts", but noted candidly that it was hard to distinguish between the two:

Whether he does this by working on the humours of the body, or stirring up the animal spirits, or by an immediate applying of his suggestions to the soul, is not so easy to be determined. There being a necessary dependence of the operations of the soul upon the texture of the body and spirits, it is not improbable that he frequently injects wicked thoughts that way. But why may he not also cast in wicked thoughts into our hearts by an immediate communication? The truth is, we cannot well find out which method he takes in his temptations.

This uncertainty did not undermine the theory of satanic injections, however. On the contrary, it made it impossible to replace the Devil's involvement in mental disturbances with a naturalistic alternative. Even a wholly organic model of the mind could not exclude the Devil as the higher cause of evil impulses. As Chilcot pithily observed, it was "a more material enquiry how we shall be able effectually to resist or prevent them".⁴⁹

While the concept of satanic thoughts was based securely in Protestant theology, it was also unaffected by political controversy. The importance of this can be illustrated by the fate of a related phenomenon: the belief in demonic possession. The two experiences were connected: indeed, the Devil's mental incursions can be viewed as a mild and temporary form of possession. When John Bunyan was assailed by the sudden impulse to blaspheme in the 1660s, he felt that "surely I am possessed of the Devil".⁵⁰ Sometimes demonic injections were a precursor of this state. In 1691 this appears to have been the case with a pious young woman in London: she fell into religious anxiety and "strange distractions" before her voice was seized by a "hellish fiend".⁵¹ While Satan's capacity to invade the mind was largely unchallenged, however, the concept of bodily possession was problematic. Both Protestant and Catholic divines in early modern Europe wrestled with the difficulty of discerning authentic cases of possession (and inspiration), and the appropriate authority by which such matters could be decided.⁵² In England as elsewhere, these issues were sharpened by religious politics. A series of dramatic exorcisms – first by members of the Jesuit mission to England in the 1580s, and subsequently by puritan ministers – provoked the scorching opposition of the future Archbishop of York, Samuel Harsnet. This culminated in the trial and ejection of the godly exorcist John Darrell, and a pamphlet war about the authenticity of his dispossessions.⁵³ In the wake of this dispute, the

ecclesiastical canons of 1605 prohibited clergy from casting out demons without first obtaining permission from their bishop. As Marcus Harnes has noted, the campaign against exorcism was an assertion of episcopal power over the interpretation of supernatural phenomena.⁵⁴ One consequence was the questioning of demonic possession itself. In his prosecution of Darrell, Harsnet persuaded some of those delivered from evil spirits by his ministry to confess to fraud. Two churchmen drawn into the controversy, John Deacon and John Walker, advanced the more radical case that possession itself had ceased after the time of the apostles.⁵⁵ In their *Dialogicall Discourses of Spirits and Divels* (1601), they argued that belief in the phenomenon had been fostered by Rome to maintain the authority of “cunning, popish, conjuring priests”.⁵⁶

Despite the parallels between demonic thoughts and physical possession, only the latter became the subject of heated debate. This reflected the political priorities of the leaders of the early Stuart church, who viewed unsanctioned exorcisms primarily as a challenge to their authority. More broadly, the concept of demonic temptation itself was too deeply entrenched to be challenged. Even Deacon and Walker asserted Satan’s power over human minds – though they denied that he could enter them directly. They argued that belief in bodily possession distracted people from the Devil’s ordinary methods of inciting falsehood and sin, so he “may more easily seduce their souls unawares”.⁵⁷ In the absence of any sustained opposition to the concept of satanic “injections”, it was easy for Protestant pastors to maintain it as part of their wider ministry to Christians facing temptation.

Some other forms of spiritual incursion proved controversial in Stuart England. One instructive example is provided by visionary dreams. Like satanic thoughts, these involved the penetration

of the mind by external powers. In contrast to demonic injections, however, prophetic dreams were traditionally viewed as a source of desirable knowledge; they therefore had the subversive potential to confer authority on their recipients. Janine Rivière has shown that churchmen and philosophers challenged the belief in revelatory dreams in the seventeenth century. Before the civil wars, the attack on divinatory dreams was combined with larger concerns about superstition, witchcraft, and the practice of judicial astrology. After 1650 it focused increasingly on the activity of sectarian religious movements. Scholars such as Henry More and John Spencer emphasised the natural origins of dreams, and interpreted claims of dream visions as delusions or signs of religious madness.⁵⁸ In this context, it is interesting to note that the concept of demonic assaults on the sleeping mind was less controversial. The practice of bedtime prayer protected English Protestants from the nocturnal temptations of the enemy long into the eighteenth century.⁵⁹

The concept of demonic thoughts not only escaped controversy in Stuart England, but also tended to support established forms of authority. This was evident in some arguments used against the religious sects that emerged during the civil wars. The Quaker belief in an “inner light” that guided women and men was often denounced as a delusion or an excuse for moral licence; but it could also be portrayed as a demonic incursion in the mind – a truly spiritual experience, but one derived from Satan rather than God. This idea was sustained by reports of Quakers deceived by false revelations. The case of a convert from Durham was publicized in anti-Quaker pamphlets in the 1650s: the man was inspired by the inner light to declare his salvation before renouncing this experience and ascribing it to the Devil. The author of one pamphlet used the episode to illustrate the supposedly infernal nature of the movement as a

whole: “It is the Devil that is in them, and not God. The Devil he deludes them, and he reigns and rules in these children of disobedience.”⁶⁰ This claim was sometimes linked to the demonic manipulation of organic processes. In an undated sermon on the “various methods of Satan’s policy”, Joseph Glanvill suggested that the Devil used natural means to deceive sectarian prophets with false visions: “when the diseased and the disturbed fancy variously displays itself, Satan makes men believe they are acted by the spirit, and that those wild agitations of sick imagination are divine motions.”⁶¹ The supposedly demonic nature of the “inner light” experienced by Quakers led critics to compare it to Satan’s favourite disguise: in the words of one pamphlet in 1657, “the Devil did never so often transform himself into an angel of light, by holding forth false lights, than in these days”.⁶²

The denunciation of the “false light” of prophecy was the most obvious way in which the concept of satanic thoughts supported orthodox opinion, but it was probably not the most important. At the level of the tormented individual, the identification of shocking ideas as demonic meant that they had to be rejected. This meant that the doctrine worked as a kind of intellectual weed-killer, destroying heterodox thoughts as they sprang up. It seems that radical speculations about religion were often extinguished in this way, as they featured prominently among the Devil’s injections. In 1631 Robert Bolton listed questioning of the Trinity and “the holy humanity of the Lord Jesus” among the “hideous thoughts” that Satan cast into human minds.⁶³ In his account of religious melancholy in 1683, the minister Samuel Annesley described sufferers who were “haunted with blasphemous injections at which they tremble, and yet cannot keep them out of their mind, either to doubt of the scripture or Christianity, or the life to come”.⁶⁴ In some cases the afflicted individuals themselves recorded the extreme ideas that

entered their minds. In 1653 Jane Turner was moved to question the existence of God, and overthrew the thought when she recognized its diabolical nature.⁶⁵ John Bunyan offered a remarkably detailed account of Satan's theological scepticism in 1666. The enemy suggested that God and Jesus were human inventions and the scriptures merely "a fable and cunning story"; and since the false revelations of Islam had deceived so many people, it was impossible to know if the Bible was any more reliable.⁶⁶ Like Turner, Bunyan repudiated these ideas in the act of ascribing them to the Devil.

These texts suggest interesting possibilities and questions. First, they imply that radical religious speculations – including unbelief – may have been rather more widespread in seventeenth-century England than is sometimes assumed. It certainly appears that godly Christians were occasionally tormented by such speculations, though they were expunged by their identification with the Devil. Secondly, it seems that some radical thoughts attributed to Satan went beyond the sudden "lightning flashes" described by Bolton. John Bunyan's arguments for unbelief involved a chain of reasoning that seems unlikely to have burst, fully formed, into his unprepared and unwilling mind. It may be that some demonic ideas were the result of ordinary (and sinful) cogitations mixed with shocking moments of dark insight. But however "the Devil's thoughts" were formed, it is clear that their attribution to the spiritual enemy meant that they had to be renounced. The doctrine of satanic thoughts encouraged a potent form of self-censorship, which inevitably supported conventional modes of belief. Satan may have been "the grand captain and father of rebels", but he also, perversely, helped to maintain the normative assumptions of Stuart England.⁶⁷

III

Many readers of this article will have asked themselves at some point a question that seems obvious in the early twenty-first century. What actually happened when people experienced “satanic thoughts”? The question arises, of course, because most modern westerners find the idea that evil spirits can invade human minds simply incredible. As Katherine Hodgkin has written of witchcraft, to study demonic thoughts is “to study something we do not believe in”.⁶⁸ It may be impossible to explain in modern terms the satanic “injections” that were reported so often in Stuart England, and it is certainly beyond the scope of this work. But the question itself points to some interesting themes that can be addressed. These include the relationship between contemporary psychopathology and the historical experience of satanic thoughts, and the role of social context in defining and dealing with mental distress.

At one level, it seems that modern-day concepts of mental illness are relevant to the experiences of early modern Christians. They involved at least superficially similar phenomena. The satanic incursions that troubled the minds of godly Protestants resemble the recurrent and unwanted thoughts associated with obsessive compulsive disorders. Crucially however, sufferers of OCD do not normally perceive these thoughts as foreign: rather, they view them as irrepressible expressions of their own anxieties. The belief that one’s mind has been invaded by alien thoughts is associated instead with schizophrenia: indeed, the perception that intrusive thoughts originate beyond the self is used by clinicians to distinguish the disorder. The fact that the perception of “thought insertion” is a first rank symptom of schizophrenia – appropriate for

confirming a diagnosis – may encourage the temptation to designate, retrospectively, people such as John Bunyan as sufferers.

To do so would be extremely problematic, however. This is because such a diagnosis would import modern assumptions into an inappropriate context. The people that endured the Devil's mental assaults in early modern England did not normally think of themselves as mentally ill; nor did the community in which they lived. The belief in cognitive passivity – in which the mind was overtaken by an outside force – was not the anomalous view of a few disturbed individuals. In some cases the belief did not even originate with those that experienced the phenomenon, but was suggested to them by religious experts. As Robert Bolton reported in the 1620s, some afflicted Christians only realized that their wicked thoughts were not their own when this was explained to them by godly ministers.⁶⁹ In other words, the belief that is now taken as an indicator of mental illness was accepted as normal at most levels of Tudor and Stuart society.

It is clear that the religious context in which these experiences took place was essential to their meaning. This observation should not surprise experts in mental health. One recent study of “spiritual emergency” – the sometimes traumatic process of religious awakening reported by modern Christians – found that subjects enter a “non-ordinary state of consciousness”. The symptoms of this state can resemble psychosis but should not, the authors suggest, be confused with it.⁷⁰ More generally, the literature of psychopathology is careful to acknowledge the social circumstances in which unusual states of mind occur. A spiritual experience such as rapture, for example, is not treated as pathological when it is consistent “with the subject’s recognisable religious traditions and peer group”; but in a different environment similar experiences may

indicate a disorder. In 2011 a study of trance and possession states in the context of Latin American spirituality argued that these conditions were not psychotic: they were embedded firmly in local religious culture, and their participants displayed no concomitant symptoms of mental disorder.⁷¹ Much the same could probably be said of the victims of demonic thoughts in seventeenth-century England. It may be the case that “thought insertion” is viewed as a defining symptom of schizophrenia only because the experience has not survived in a contemporary religious community, within which it could not be classed as pathological.

While the cultural context of Stuart England determined the interpretation of “satanic thoughts”, it also shaped their treatment and cure. There is some evidence that this was effective. As Michael MacDonald and others have noted, “spiritual physic” could produce real cures for those afflicted with mental distress.⁷² Robert Bolton observed that some of those troubled by strange thoughts “received great ease and comfort” when they were told that these thoughts had been placed in their minds by an external power.⁷³ In the last thirty years, the role of such spiritual assumptions in helping people to recover from mental distress has been increasingly acknowledged in our own world. Holistic approaches to psychiatry make space for patients’ religious understanding of their symptoms, including dissociative experiences such as voices in the mind.⁷⁴ Moving in the other direction, the advice of early modern devotional writers sometimes resembled that of modern clinicians. To take one example, the therapeutic value of talking about unwanted and distressing thoughts in a sympathetic environment is widely recognized today. Seventeenth-century pastors agreed: they reminded those shaken by satanic “injections” that their experience was not unique, and told them to seek company among their godly friends. The advice of John Durant in 1651 was typical:

Why do you give way to your grief, and will not make it known? Is there any comfort in your concealment? Is it not rather adding affliction to affliction? You sadden the hearts of your friends while they see you disquieted and not willing to open your soul to theirs.⁷⁵

William Chilcot repeated this guidance in the 1690s, and noted that “the Devil’s temptations and injections . . . are usually more prevalent, and come with greater force, when people are alone than when they are in society”.⁷⁶ This related to another commonplace about unwelcome thoughts that is also found in modern therapeutic literature: they should be treated as passing experiences and not dwelt upon. As Bolton remarked in 1631, the victims of Satan’s injections could do nothing to prevent them, but they could deny them “any rest or residence in their imagination”.⁷⁷ Similarly, Chilcot advised his readers to cast out “horrid, profane or blasphemous thoughts” as soon as they came: “do not let your mind dwell upon them one moment”.⁷⁸ Some modern experts on mental health advocate the same response. In a study published in 2013, the explicit goal of therapy was for patients to “let go” of the intrusive voices in their minds, “abandoning attempts to control the experience and instead disengaging attention from it”.⁷⁹

There are historical ironies here. It was probably easier for men and women to cast aside unbidden thoughts when they believed that they came from outside their own minds in the first place. It is only comparatively recently that some therapists have made space for a spiritual understanding of such experiences, where this is consistent with their patients’ assumptions; and the once commonplace belief in “thought insertion” remains a diagnostic indicator of schizophrenia. Ultimately, the concept of satanic thought is a reminder of the historical

parameters of human perception. It also illustrates the importance of the world of spirits to the culture of early modern England: the practice of "thinking with demons" not only expanded the content of Stuart intellectual life, but also the ways in which people understood, and regulated, the thoughts inside their own heads.⁸⁰

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¹ Chilcot, *Practical Treatise*, 118.

² Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, especially 26-31.

³ Irish, *Levamen Infirmi*, 49.

⁴ For the Devil's power within nature see Clark, *Thinking With Demons*, chapter eleven, especially 166.

⁵ I am grateful to Prof Eric Prost for pointing out the connection to OCD, and Profs Eleanor Bradley and Lisa Jones for their guidance on the clinical manifestations of "thought insertion". Oyebode, *Sims' Symptoms in the Mind*, 152-3.

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27-41; quotation, 39.

⁷ See Marcus Harmes, "The Devil and Bishops".

⁸ On the increased demand for medical services, see Mortimer, *The Dying and the Doctors*.

⁹ Bright, *Treatise*, 1, 228.

¹⁰ Hall, *Black and Terrible*, 4.

¹¹ Bright, *Treatise*, 237.

¹² For Burton's emphasis on the internal causes of mental distress, see Gowland, *Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy*, especially chapter one, section nine.

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- ¹³ Burton, *Anatomy*, part 1, section 3, member 3, subsection 1.
- ¹⁴ Burton, *Anatomy*, part 3, section 4, member 2, subsection 6.
- ¹⁵ Burton, *Anatomy*, part 3, section 4, member 2, subsection 3.
- ¹⁶ For an analysis of the physiological and demonic components of Drake's illness, see Schmidt, *Melancholy*, especially 68-70.
- ¹⁷ Spencer, *Discourse*, 99, 115.
- ¹⁸ Hall, *Black and Terrible*, 4-5.
- ¹⁹ Ness, *Church History*, 129.
- ²⁰ Irish, *Levamen*, 48-50.
- ²¹ Bright, *Treatise*, 2.
- ²² Cranmer is quoted in Johnstone, *The Devil*, 72.
- ²³ Perkins, *Combat*, 8.
- ²⁴ See, for instance, Spencer, *Discourse*, 115.
- ²⁵ Bolton, *Three-fold Treatise*, 206.
- ²⁶ Bolton, *Instructions*, 197, 322, 544.
- ²⁷ Bolton, *Three-fold Treatise*, 218.
- ²⁸ On these points, see especially Bolton, *Instructions*, 533, 549.
- ²⁹ Bolton, *Three-fold Treatise*, 218-9.
- ³⁰ Robert Burton used the phrase "religious melancholy" to distinguish a species of mental suffering in 1621. This condition overlapped with the older concept of religious "despair", which was understood in spiritual terms. In practice the kind of affliction that Burton described was often treated as a religious phenomenon as well as a medical one. See Schmidt, *Melancholy*, 49-53.
- ³¹ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 27-32, quotation 37-8.
- ³² Wilymat, *Physicke*, 12, 83, 94.
- ³³ Bolton, *Instructions*, 288.
- ³⁴ Durant, *Comfort & Counsell*, 221.
- ³⁵ Baxter, *Gods Goodness*, 2-6; quotation, 3.
- ³⁶ Rogers, *Discourse*, lxiii-lxiv.
- ³⁷ Chilcot, *Practical Treatise*, 235.
- ³⁸ Irish, *Levamen*, 48.
- ³⁹ See Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil*, especially chapter three; Darren Oldridge, *The Devil*, 40-42, 64-72. For parallel developments within Catholicism, see Young, *English Catholics*, 40-44.
- ⁴⁰ This was adapted from John 8:44: "When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it."
- ⁴¹ Johnstone, *The Devil*, 61.
- ⁴² Ball, *Power of Godlines*, 119.
- ⁴³ Gregory, *Historical Anatomy*, 114-5.
- ⁴⁴ Durant, *Comfort*, 28-9, 86-7.
- ⁴⁵ See Hartley, "Spiritual Physic".
- ⁴⁶ Bolton, *Instructions*, 197.
- ⁴⁷ Baxter, *Gods Goodness*, 6.
- ⁴⁸ Rogers, *Discourse*, lvii, lxi, lxxviii.
- ⁴⁹ Chilcot, *Practical Treatise*, 118-9.
- ⁵⁰ Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 28.
- ⁵¹ *Distressed Gentlewoman*.
- ⁵² On the confessional context of demonic possession and exorcism, see Levack, *Devil Within*, 85-91; Ferber, *Demonic Possession*, especially chapter seven.
- ⁵³ For the Darrell controversy and its aftermath, see Gibson, *Possession*.
- ⁵⁴ Harmes, "The Devil and Bishops", especially 190-1.
- ⁵⁵ For Deacon and Walker's critique of possession, see Freeman, "Demons", 51-3.
- ⁵⁶ Deacon and Walker, *Dialogicall Discourses*, 156.

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- ⁵⁷ Deacon and Walker, *Dialogicall Discourses*, 45, 228-30; quotation, 230.
- ⁵⁸ Rivière, *Dreams*, 89-91, 103-9.
- ⁵⁹ For bedtime prayers against temptation, see Handley, *Sleep*, 86- 90.
- ⁶⁰ *Devil Turned Quaker*, A2v.
- ⁶¹ Glanvill, *Some Discourses*, 385.
- ⁶² *Sad Caveat*, 4.
- ⁶³ Bolton, *Instructions*, 538.
- ⁶⁴ Annesley, *Continuation*, 271.
- ⁶⁵ Turner, *Choice Experiences*, 25, 117-8.
- ⁶⁶ Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 27.
- ⁶⁷ The quotation is from the Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion in *Certayne Sermons*.
- ⁶⁸ Hodgkin, "Reasoning with Unreason", 217.
- ⁶⁹ Bolton, *Three-fold Treatise*, 206-7.
- ⁷⁰ Harris, Rock and Clark, "Spiritual Emergency".
- ⁷¹ Oyebode, *Sims' Symptoms of the Mind*, 199, 264.
- ⁷² MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 193-6.
- ⁷³ Bolton, *Three-fold Treatise*, 207.
- ⁷⁴ See, for example, Clarke, "Spirituality"; and Chidarikire, "Spirituality", especially 301.
- ⁷⁵ Durant, *Comfort*, 145-6.
- ⁷⁶ Chilcot, *Practical Treatise*, 256.
- ⁷⁷ Bolton, *Instructions*, 544.
- ⁷⁸ Chilcot, *Practical Treatise*, 140.
- ⁷⁹ Neil Thomas, Eric Morris, Fran Shawyer and John Farhall, "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Voices", in Morris, *et al*, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, 98.
- ⁸⁰ This phrase is borrowed from Stuart Clark, whose *Thinking with Demons* remains an essential guide to the intellectual world made possible by the belief in evil spirits.