

## Prayer for family and friends

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ARTICLE

## Prayer for Family and Friends: The Body and Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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### Abstract

This article explores how writers, predominantly adhering to a variety of different Christian denominations but also including Jewish writers, discussed religion and the body in letters throughout the long eighteenth century. It draws on a corpus of over 2,500 familiar letters written by men and women of different denominations between 1675 and 1820. That these letters were not chosen because of their religious content makes them a good ‘test’ of the role of faith in everyday understandings of the body. This article underscores the continued centrality of religious discourse and devotional practice in eighteenth-century everyday life. Our research finds that religion was a commonplace register deployed when discussing bodily matters throughout the long eighteenth century. Significantly, this was the case for individuals who otherwise made scant reference to their faith. Discussion of the physical body encouraged recourse to providence, a public discussion of doctrine, and the shared expression of devotion. The ongoing force of religion in people’s lives was thus intimately tied to their embodied experiences. Letters not only expressed but actively maintained this widely shared religious framework for understanding the body.

For eighteenth-century friends and family separated by distance, letters were the primary means of keeping in touch. These everyday ‘familiar’ letters teem with bodies. ‘Motivated by the very absence of the body, letters nonetheless brought people together, often by bringing the body to the fore’, a recent study notes.<sup>1</sup> Bodies in letters have been subject to study, with doctor–patient, literary, and more quotidian letters being examined from a range of

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllyne Haggerty, and Karen Harvey, ‘Introduction’, in Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllyne Haggerty, and Karen Harvey, eds., *Letters and the body, 1700–1830: writing and embodiment* (Abingdon, 2023), p. 1.

perspectives.<sup>2</sup> This article adds to this discussion by exploring how writers, predominantly adhering to a variety of different Christian denominations but also including Jewish writers, discussed religion and body in letters throughout the long eighteenth century. It shows that religion was a commonplace register used to discuss the functions and feelings of the body, even by those who otherwise did not display overt signs of piety. In demonstrating the laity's sustained and deep reliance on religious language in their framings of bodily sensation, or in confronting bodily affliction, the article builds on recent work which underscores the continuing centrality of religion and faith in eighteenth-century everyday life and which posits a 'postsecular' eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> A generation of scholars have put paid to the idea that the Church of England was a failing institution losing its grip on the population, particularly amongst the lower orders and in urban centres.<sup>4</sup> This article shows the continued relevance of religious framings of the body for ordinary people from 1680 to 1820. This was not simply a hangover from the seventeenth century but was reshaped and revived by new religious traditions that emerged during the eighteenth century. Many of those associated with the Methodist movement, notably John Wesley, who published the influential *Primitive physic*, had a keen interest in the interaction between religion and medicine; equally, evangelical piety was widely understood as the 'religion of the heart'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the force of religion in matters relating to the body, we will show, is evident across a range of faith groups, not just evangelicals and dissenters. That Christian denominations should be so concerned with the body, as well as the soul, perhaps follows naturally from the doctrine that God was made flesh.<sup>6</sup> Jewish traditions also provided believers with religious frameworks for understanding and experiencing the body. Kabbalistic writers of the sixteenth and

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Wild, *Medicine by post: the changing voice of illness in eighteenth-century British consultation letters and literature* (Amsterdam and New York, NY, 2006); Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, *Epistolary bodies: gender and genre in the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters* (Stanford, CA, 1996); Goldsmith, Haggerty, and Harvey eds., *Letters and the body, 1700-1830*.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Barker, 'Soul, purse and family: middling and lower-class masculinity in eighteenth-century Manchester', *Social History*, 33 (2008), pp. 12-35; J. C. D. Clark, 'Secularization and modernization: the failure of a "grand narrative"', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), pp. 161-94; Alison Conway and Corrine Harol, 'Toward a postsecular eighteenth century', *Literature Compass*, 12 (2015), pp. 565-74; Jeremy Gregory, 'Transforming "the age of reason" into "an age of faiths": or, putting religions and beliefs (back) into the eighteenth century', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32 (2009), pp. 287-305.

<sup>4</sup> For a survey of this scholarship, see Jeremy Gregory, 'The long eighteenth century', in R. Maddox and J. Vickers, eds., *The Cambridge companion to John Wesley* (Cambridge Companions to Religion) (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 13-40.

<sup>5</sup> See Phyllis Mack, *Heart religion in the British Enlightenment: gender and emotion in early Methodism* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 171-218; Deborah Madden, 'A cheap, safe and natural medicine': religion, medicine and culture in John Wesley's *Primitive physic* (Leiden, 2007); Deborah Madden, 'Wesley as adviser on health and healing', in Maddox and Vickers, eds., *The Cambridge companion to John Wesley*, pp. 176-89. Quote from Randy L. Maddox, 'John Wesley on holistic health and healing', *Methodist History*, 46 (2007), p. 4; John Coffey, ed., *Heart religion: evangelical piety in England & Ireland, 1690-1850* (Oxford, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> David Tripp, 'The image of the body in the Protestant Reformation', in Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the body* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 133.

seventeenth centuries had emphasized the significance of the human body, foregrounding the significance of the 'life of the flesh' in determining an individual's relationship with God.<sup>7</sup> Just as many early modern English works on health and regimen were written by Protestant clergy, so similar writings were produced by prominent members of Britain's Sephardi and Ashkenazi congregations.<sup>8</sup> Widespread diversity across the Jewish diaspora, as well as within eighteenth-century British Christian communities, was palpable. Nevertheless, the interconnection of religion and medicine is apparent in works produced by Jews and Christians alike, as is the importance of the body to spirituality and the soul.

Notions of providence were at the heart of understandings of religion and the body; hence, this article offers significant findings about commonly held understandings of providence. 'For nearly everyone God was central to life... He was providentially active in the world', William Jacob has written of eighteenth-century society.<sup>9</sup> Providence remained an important explanatory framework for Protestants even as understandings of providential workings changed.<sup>10</sup> During the eighteenth century, mechanistic philosophies encouraged the view that God's intervention in the world was more 'distant', with human attempts to change fortunes and proactively alleviate suffering increasingly viewed positively.<sup>11</sup> Yet, this was an area of vociferous debate. Some increasingly argued for 'general' providence – a God that had set the world in motion but was subsequently largely non-interventionist – and it was the most extreme version of this view that characterized the Deist position.<sup>12</sup> Yet others continued to have a strong belief in some kind of 'special' or 'particular' providence – a God that actively intervened in particular circumstances, punishing sin, rewarding those who prayed or asked for forgiveness.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Roni Weinstein, 'The rise of the body in early modern Jewish society', in Maria Diemling and Giuseppe Veltri, eds., *The Jewish body: corporeality, society, and identity in the Renaissance and early modern period* (Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 21–3.

<sup>8</sup> Tessa Storey, 'English and Italian health advice: Protestant and Catholic bodies', in Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey, eds., *Conserving health in early modern culture: bodies and environments in Italy and England* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 210–34; Richard Barnett, 'Dr Jacob de Castro Sarmiento and Sephardim in medical practice in 18th-century London', *Transactions & Miscellanies (Jewish Historical Society of England)*, 27 (1978–80), pp. 85–8.

<sup>9</sup> W. M. Jacob, *Lay people and religion in the early eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> Brodie Waddell, *God, duty and community in English economic life, 1660–1720* (Woodbridge, 2012), p. 63; Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and "the disenchantment of the world" reassessed', *Historical Journal*, 51 (2008), pp. 497–528, at p. 501; Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in early modern England* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Philippa Koch, *The course of God's providence: religion, health, and the body in early America* (New York, NY, 2021), pp. 2–3.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: theology, politics, and Newtonian public science* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 183–90.

<sup>13</sup> J. C. D. Clark, 'Providence, predestination and progress: or, did the Enlightenment fail?' *Albion: A Quarterly Journal concerned with British Studies*, 35 (2003) pp. 559–89, at p. 576; Koch, *Course of God's providence*, p. 3. Victoria A. Lewis, 'Providence, emotion and self-writing in England, c. 1660 – c.1720' (Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 2018), p. 4.

These positions were not wholly distinct: for some theologians, general providence might be constituted by many smaller acts of particular providence.<sup>14</sup>

An individual's view of providence could profoundly shape their understanding of the causes of accidents and illness, the progress of disease, the drivers of recovery, and the journey through decline, dying, and death. If God worked more directly in the world through particular providence, an individual might utilize devotional practice as a prophylactic against ill health or route to recovery, though as Keith Thomas rightly cautions, 'no one claimed that prayer was automatically efficacious in every context'.<sup>15</sup> Working through general providence, in contrast, the laws God had established to set the natural world in motion could not be manipulated and arguably placed individuals in a more passive role concerning their bodily health. The encouragement of human action in matters of health and salvation has been associated with Arminian theologies (those which resisted Calvinist predestination), and Wesleyan Methodism, but as Koch has shown, even those bound by Calvinist theologies were not resigned to human suffering and could be proactive when faced with illness.<sup>16</sup> The letters studied here show individuals from across the religious spectrum drawing directly on ideas of providence, and that many people developed personal understandings of providence that cannot be clearly accommodated by distinctions between 'general' or 'particular'.<sup>17</sup> Individuals applied different understandings of providence flexibly in specific epistolary, relational, and experiential contexts, but they also shared a framework of providence that allowed them to reassure one another – sometimes in cross-confessional exchanges – that all sufferings were temporary and part of God's plan and that – even in the darkest moments – they were not alone.

The providential ways of understanding the body uncovered in this article are hugely significant for the history of medicine and the body, as well as religion. The established church remained a principal force in shaping many beliefs, including those around sexuality, for example: religion and sex 'were for most people inseparable'; we might expect the same for religion and the body.<sup>18</sup> Significant studies have certainly demonstrated the continuing force of religion in lived experiences of health, sickness, and recovery, though

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<sup>14</sup> Clark, 'Providence, predestination and progress', p. 577.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England* (London, 1991; orig. edn 1971), p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Koch, *Course of God's providence*, p. 5. On the Arminian and Calvinist aspects of Methodism as seen in tensions between John Wesley and George Whitefield, see Geordan Hammond, 'Whitefield, John Wesley, and revival leadership', in Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones, eds., *George Whitefield: life, context, and legacy* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 98–114.

<sup>17</sup> Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens, 'Judaism and providence', in Kelly James Clark and Jeffrey Koprowski, eds., *Abrahamic reflections on randomness and providence* (Cham, 2022), p. 151; Weinstein, 'The rise of the body in early modern Jewish society', p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> William Gibson and Joanne Begiato, *Sex and the church in the long eighteenth century* (London and New York, NY, 2017), p. 5.

these conclude around 1720.<sup>19</sup> Other important work challenges narratives of the secularization of medical practice in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>20</sup> Roy Porter and Dorothy Porter insisted on the continuing importance of religion to lay (non-medical) understandings of the body during the period 1650–1850, though they drew many of their examples from the seventeenth century, from dissenters, or from the particularly pious.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the views of Britain’s lay conforming Protestant, Catholic, and especially Jewish communities are generally absent from this scholarship. More recent work by Guenter Risse envisions the learned views of ‘enlightened’ doctors as distinct from the culture of ‘the majority...making up the lower classes’ in which illness was viewed in the context of ‘divine providence’ and met with resignation.<sup>22</sup> This class-based account was at the heart of Roy Porter’s *Flesh in the age of reason* (2003), in which the secular and polite elites (including medical professionals) gradually displaced both Christian ideas of the soul and a pre-occupation with the flesh associated with the lower ranks, in favour of a notion of the person rooted firmly in the secular and rational mind.<sup>23</sup> This stands in contrast to the findings of Philippa Koch’s study of early America, in which the body, faith, and providence continued to interact well into the eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> The letters used in this present study are drawn from a broadly defined middling-sort which encompassed the emerging polite and professional elites. They suggest that supposedly ascendant ‘secularized’ medical ideas were not prominent in ordinary understandings of the body as much as we might expect, and that faith and providence continued to be meaningful in determining men’s and women’s understandings of their bodies throughout the period of the Enlightenment. They also suggest that bodies were at the heart of eighteenth-century lay religion.

## I

Writing of many kinds was inextricably tied to a religious life in this period, especially for Protestants.<sup>25</sup> Autobiographical works such as diaries were rooted in Protestant devotional traditions and as such religion naturally

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Olivia Weisser, *Ill composed: sickness, gender, and belief in early modern England* (New Haven, CT, 2015); Hannah Newton, *Misery to mirth: recovery from illness in early modern England* (Oxford, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Compare Andrew Wear, ‘Medical practice in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England: continuity and union’, in Roger French and Andrew Wear, eds., *The medical revolution of the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 294–320, with Sophie Mann, ‘“A dose of physick”: medical practice and confessional identity within the household’, *Studies in Church History*, 50 (2014), pp. 282–93.

<sup>21</sup> Roy Porter and Dorothy Porter, *In sickness and in health: the British experience, 1650–1850* (London, 1998), pp. 169–79.

<sup>22</sup> Guenter B. Risse, ‘Medicine in the age of Enlightenment’, in Andrew Wear, ed., *Medicine in society: historical essays* (Cambridge and New York, NY, 1992), p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> Roy Porter, *Flesh in the age of reason* (London, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Koch, *Course of God’s providence*.

<sup>25</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), esp. chs. 11 and 12.

features prominently in these.<sup>26</sup> The same is not generally true of ‘familiar letters’ – those exchanged between family and friends – which became a feature of everyday life in the eighteenth century, used to pass on news, to request money, or to accompany items of clothing or food.<sup>27</sup> Yet, some eighteenth-century religious traditions were intrinsically linked with the practice of letter-writing.<sup>28</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh argues that ‘the Evangelical Revival was also an epistolary revival’; letters ‘communicated directly from heart to heart’ and helped forge this ‘heart religion’.<sup>29</sup> Letters evidently played a crucial role in solidifying religious friendships, particularly for dissenting groups.<sup>30</sup> One important contribution of this article, however, is the finding that the spiritual aspects of letters were not the preserve of religious groups with strong epistolary traditions. It is important that the letters used here were not selected specifically for an investigation of religion. They are drawn from a corpus collected for the project, ‘Material Identities, Social Bodies: Embodiment in British Letters, c. 1680–1820’ and were chosen because they contain significant discussion of the body.<sup>31</sup> While we have endeavoured to ensure the corpus is balanced in terms of gender, rank, geography, and religion, and to include letters written throughout the long eighteenth century, it necessarily remains selective.

At the time of writing, the database that underpins this study contains 2,538 familiar letters from archives and correspondence collections across the British Isles. These familiar letters were written to generally distant friends and family to enquire after and report details on topics including health, travel, visits to mutual acquaintances, or work or schooling. For most of the letters analysed in this study, religion was ancillary to the main function of the correspondence. Neither were these letters selected for their religious content. Instead, letters were selected because they contained some meaningful discussion of the body. Nevertheless, a significant – and initially unanticipated – feature of these everyday letters was the prominence of religious language when discussing the body. While some of our ‘middling’ letter-writers were from clergy families, others were merchants or engaged in business, or were members of professional families that included physicians or lawyers. The presence of incidental religious references, and religious framings of the body, across the

<sup>26</sup> Barker, ‘Soul, purse and family’, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> C. Brant, *Eighteenth-century letters and British culture* (Basingstoke, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Alison Searle and Emily Vine, ‘“We have sick souls when god’s physic works not”: Samuel Rutherford’s pastoral letters as a form of literary cure’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 37 (2022), pp. 913–36.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh, ‘Spiritual experience and early evangelical correspondence’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79 (2016), pp. 456, 458.

<sup>30</sup> Alison Searle, ‘“Though I am a stranger to you by face, yet in neere bonds by faith”: a transatlantic puritan Republic of Letters’, *Early American Literature*, 43 (2008), pp. 277–308; Tessa Whitehouse, *The textual culture of English Protestant dissent, 1720–1800* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 22–54; Naomi Pullin, *Female friends and the making of transatlantic Quakerism, 1650–1750* (Cambridge, 2018); Isabel Rivers, ‘Lives and letters’, in *Vanity fair and the celestial city: dissenting, Methodist, and evangelical literary culture in England, 1720–1800* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 291–308; Susan Whyman, *The pen and the people: English letter writers 1660–1800* (Oxford, 2009), p. 155.

<sup>31</sup> Leverhulme Project Grant RPG-2020-163, 2021–2025.



corpus is therefore striking. In our consideration of different family collections, we draw a distinction between families who more habitually used religious language within their correspondence (often, but not always, clergy families), and those who did not mention God or providence except when discussing occasions where the body was *in extremis*. Where letter-writers otherwise rarely discussed devotional practice or used religious language, expressions of religious language or devotional practice in relation to the body are particularly notable. While expressions of piety are not a direct index of faith, the extent, frequency, and repetition of religious language and practice embodied in these letters demonstrate the shared currency of religion, certainly in matters relating to the body.

Situating a letter-writer's 'personal religious identity' – the character of their own beliefs – is often necessarily approximate. Even biographical studies of individuals who were prominent within the eighteenth-century church or theological debates underline the heterogeneous nature of these individuals' religious convictions.<sup>32</sup> British religious culture during the long eighteenth century was shaped by the legacies of the 1689 'Toleration Act', which saw developing (if uneven and partial) tolerance towards those who dissented from the Church of England, and which contributed to an unprecedented plurality of Christian churches and expanding Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jewish communities. Alongside plurality and growing literacy, faith was increasingly recognized to be a matter of individual choice rather than enforced conformity; individuals personalized religion and Protestants might move between denominations. So too did denominational identities shift: for much of the period, Methodists saw themselves as both Anglican and Methodist.<sup>33</sup> Key to understanding the evangelical revival more broadly is 'polygenesis'.<sup>34</sup> Further, for much of our period, several of these denominations (such as Unitarianism) took the form of an emerging 'theological tendency' rather than a clearly defined faith position.<sup>35</sup> We assign religious affiliation on the basis of known biographical information or clear indications from the letters and we sometimes assign more than one affiliation if a person is known to have changed, though we are not always able to reconstruct the specific faith positions of every individual. In cases where biographical information or the letters suggest that conforming to the Church of England is *likely*, we assign to this affiliation. The religious affiliations of those people (letter-writers or subjects of letters) for whom we have sufficient biographical information are as follows: Church of England 358 (57.0 per cent), Protestant dissent 87 (13.9 per cent of persons with a recorded religion), Quaker 31 (4.9 per cent), Roman Catholic 26 (4.1 per cent), Unitarian 19 (3.0 per cent), Baptist 17 (2.7 per cent), Methodist 5 (0.8 per cent), and Jewish 5 (0.8 per cent). It is worth noting

<sup>32</sup> William Gibson and Robert C. Ingram, eds., *Religious identities in Britain, 1660–1832* (Aldershot, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Jeremy Gregory, "'In the church I will live and die": John Wesley, the Church of England, and Methodism', in Gibson and Ingram, eds., *Religious identities in Britain*, pp. 147–78.

<sup>34</sup> John Coffey, 'Introduction', in John Coffey, ed., *Heart religion: evangelical piety in England and Ireland, 1690–1850* (Oxford, 2016), p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian radicalism: political rhetoric, 1770–1814* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 3.



that the Church of England is under-represented in this sample.<sup>36</sup> For some religious communities, such as Quakers and other Protestant nonconformists, exchanging letters about bodily and spiritual health was an important means of identity formation.<sup>37</sup> This might be why they are over-represented in a sample selected for its body content. Nevertheless, this corpus represents a broad range of religious views and offers a significant opportunity to compare the different ways in which the body was discussed in letters.

In this article, we examine the content of letters using methods of close reading. But it is worth noting that the project database allows us to generate data in three different ways, each of which produces significant corpus-level results for the current study. First, we categorize letters according to the nature of their content on the body. Currently, 540 out of 2,538 letters, or 21.3 per cent of the total letters in our database, contain 'religious' commentary on the body or discussions, descriptions, or advice about the body which is religious in nature. We determine religious commentary to comprise a broad range of references to God, providence, or prayer, including expressions of thanks to God when health was preserved, or requests for prayers to aid recovery. Protestants who we know conformed to the Church of England and Unitarians were much less likely to frame their letters in this way; Methodists and Baptists were the most likely. Second, we label specific features of the letter content, including some which pertain to religion. Examples are 'devotional practice' when its embodied nature renders it a 'bodily activity' (e.g. prayer, bible reading, attendance at a religious meeting) and 'religion' as a 'treatment' (e.g. attributing recovery to God's intervention, or consoling those with unsettled minds with reminders to trust in providence). There are 450 instances of 'devotional practice' as 'bodily activity' (compared to 60 of 'theatre-going', 286 of 'walking', 293 of 'childbirth', and 2,025 of 'visiting', for example), and this was more common in letters of nonconforming Protestants. Strikingly, we have 154 references to religion as a treatment for individuals (compared to 211 for 'doctor' and 76 for 'taking the waters'): people looked to their faith to regain physical and mental health. Third, the database allows us to search full transcriptions of the letters and to identify letters of particular interest for further analysis.<sup>38</sup> Search terms included variations of 'prayer', 'providence', and 'blessing', and results were analysed to determine whether such phrases were used in relation to the body. Our methodology was not to find particularly 'religious' letters, or to find letters with high

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<sup>36</sup> The Church of England had the nominal support of almost 90 per cent of the population until the late eighteenth century. See William Gibson and Robert C. Ingram, 'Introduction', in Gibson and Robert Ingram, eds., *Religious identities in Britain*, p. 1. The remainder of the people recorded in the database do not have a religious affiliation recorded due to insufficient information; they are likely to be Church of England. At the time of writing, there are 2,538 letters in the database but many thousands yet to be input. Some of the letters drawn on for this article are not yet entered into the database.

<sup>37</sup> Searle, "“Though I am a stranger to you by face”"; Whitehouse, *The textual culture of English Protestant dissent*, pp. 22–54; Pullin, *Female friends and the making of transatlantic Quakerism*.

<sup>38</sup> All the figures in this paragraph derive from the database version dating 25 May 2023 (hereafter DB 25.5.23).

percentages of religious phrases, but instead to identify sections of letters where bodily experience was framed in religious terms (including where such discussions took up a small proportion of the whole letter, or where religious references were uncharacteristic in the context of a run of letters). There is more work to be done examining the denominational differences that emerge from these sample results but this article explores the equally striking commonalities. The corpus-level data demonstrate the widespread presence of an overarching Jewish and Christian discourse as a context for experiences and understandings of the body in the long eighteenth century. This is underscored by the closer examination of the letters that now follows.

## II

Passing references to relative health and bodily experience were often framed in terms of God's will and letter-writers frequently offered thanks to God for the abatement of ill health. The phrase 'thank God' appears in 143 letters, while fifty letters contained the related phrase 'bless God', all in the vast majority of cases relating to health.<sup>39</sup> Devotional manuals of the seventeenth century had encouraged believers to 'thank God' each day for preservation and the provision of continued health and life.<sup>40</sup> Hannah Newton's account of the role of providence in experiences of recovery prior to 1720 establishes that for early modern people, 'ultimately it was the Lord who had raised them from the sickbed'.<sup>41</sup> This clearly continued throughout the eighteenth century. So too were references to God as 'the great physician', an ancient metaphor that was widely used in the seventeenth century, deployed by letter-writers throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>42</sup> While religious language had been a long-standing component of epistolary rhetoric, it co-existed with conventions of authenticity, alongside 'an internalized (and personalized) consciousness of tropes of spirituality'.<sup>43</sup> We determine such phrases as more than platitudes, rooted in longer devotional traditions and indicative of religious registers for discussing bodily ill health and recovery. The prevalence of phrases similar to 'thank God' in these eighteenth-century letters does not mean they were formulaic or devoid of meaning. Their presence almost exclusively alongside discussion of the body underlines how important religion was when making sense of affliction or the return to health. They also suggest the potency invested in devotional practice conducted through the exchange of letters for matters relating to the body.

<sup>39</sup> Variations on these phrases were also used, though less often: 'thanks be to God' = 11 letters; 'bless the Lord' = 2. Source: DB 25.5.23 (2,538 letters).

<sup>40</sup> Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in early modern England* (Oxford, 2000), p. 281.

<sup>41</sup> Newton, *Misery to mirth*, p. 131.

<sup>42</sup> David Harley, 'Medical metaphors in English moral theology, 1560–1660', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 48 (1993), pp. 399–400; Huntington Library (HL), SFP 274, Thomas Stutterd to Mary Stutterd, 14 May 1789, fos. 1–2; Mack, *Heart religion*, pp. 178–82.

<sup>43</sup> Gary Schneider, 'Introduction', in Anne Dunan Page and Clothilde Prunier, eds., *Debating the faith: religion and letter writing in Great Britain, 1550–1800* (London, 2013), p. 10.

Examples from Catholic, Jewish, Quaker, and conforming Protestant writers demonstrate that letter-writers of different religious leanings consistently acknowledged God's ability to intervene in matters of health and sickness. In 1727, Susanna Wesley, who had joined the Church of England as a young adolescent, wrote to her son John: 'I had answered you<sup>f</sup> Letter but was prevented by an unusual Illness, w[hi]<sup>ch</sup> I thank God is pretty well over.'<sup>44</sup> Wesley's understanding of providence adhered to Anglican doctrine, but, like many of the teachings she instilled in her children, may have influenced John's distinctly 'Wesleyan' interpretations: in this instance, perhaps his desire to thank God for 'his kind protection' in all aspects of life.<sup>45</sup> Yet, thanks to God peppered the letters of the less overtly pious laity, such as when the Anglican merchant Richard Dalton reported to his colleague in 1735 that his wife 'thank God is got better',<sup>46</sup> or when Jane Brownsword (also Anglican), informed her friend Ann Hare in 1773, 'now with gratitude let me acknowledge that a kind Providence has restor'd me to my former self for I never was in better state of health'.<sup>47</sup> Notably, some of the most explicit associations between recovery and providential intervention appear in letters written towards the end of the eighteenth century. Recovering from a fever in 1786, the Catholic Frances Jerningham acknowledged that her teenage daughter Charlotte 'will be glad to see my Hand-writing again' before underlining that 'now thank God I am really quite Recover'd'.<sup>48</sup> Delivering good news, the letter was also a pedagogic opportunity for a mother to model appropriate thanks to God. In August 1801, a Jewish woman in Brighton, Susanna Samuel, wrote to her son Abraham: 'was very happy to hear you are all in Good Health the same is not wanting by us Bless (God)'.<sup>49</sup> Samuel attributed both the health of her son's family and her own household to God's blessing in a formulation barely indistinguishable from those used by Christian letter-writers.

Giving thanks acknowledged the benevolent role of God and framed the return to health in providential terms. Letter-writers also invited God's intervention, signalled by phrases such as 'God grant', one most often appearing in the context of health.<sup>50</sup> Even more striking are the occasions where writers included prayers to God in the letter. Prayer had many purposes, but central was the act of petitioning or 'begging of God for whatever we stand most in

<sup>44</sup> John Rylands Research Institute and Library (JRRIL), DDWF1/1/8, Samuel and Susannah Wesley to John and Charles Wesley, 5 July 1727.

<sup>45</sup> Howard A. Snyder, 'Works of grace and providence: the structure of John Wesley's theology', *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, 10 (2018), pp. 151–76, at p. 158.

<sup>46</sup> JRRIL, BAG/5/4/62, Richard Dalton to John Dawson, 24 Jan. 1735.

<sup>47</sup> Sheffield Archives, LD1576/7/5, [Jane] Brownsword to Ann Hare, 7 June 1773.

<sup>48</sup> University of Birmingham Cadbury Library, JER/4, Lady Frances Jerningham to Charlotte Jerningham, 26 June 1786.

<sup>49</sup> Jewish Museum London, MSS 294, 6 C1988.28.6, Susanna Samuel to Abraham Samuel, 31 Aug. 1801.

<sup>50</sup> Other examples include: 'may god' = 12 letters; 'may the Lord' = 8; 'God grant' = 17; 'God will/would grant' = 3; 'it pleased God' = 7; 'God willing' = 31. Source: DB 25.5.2023 (2,538 letters).

need of relating to the soul or the body.<sup>51</sup> This was clearly adopted in letters. In 1719, the nonconformist Elizabeth Tucker wrote to her daughter Barbara – but also directly addressed God – in language reminiscent of prayer:

if it please y<sup>e</sup> Almighty  
to restore y<sup>e</sup> Health of my Dear Husband & bring my Dear Chil  
dren Safe & grant us all our health I shall think my self [damaged]  
ly happy.<sup>52</sup>

Tucker's first husband, and Barbara's father, was merchant and astrologer Samuel Jeake, son of a nonconformist preacher of the same name. It is unsurprising that her letter to her daughter modelled the kind of godly language that would be familiar within family discourse. Such petitionary prayers were most often made on behalf of others. In 1753, Esther Black assured her father that she did 'thank God' his constitution could deal with extended trips away, which – she added – 'I Pray God long to Continue.'<sup>53</sup> This trust in God's ability to intervene and relieve physical suffering was also visible in Catholic letters. In 1786, Henry Bostock wrote to his sister-in-law Mary Huddleston:

may it please God to grant me the cure of ye wound under my eye &  
which, I think, is much as usual, sometimes better sometimes  
worse, but has never yet affected ye sight.<sup>54</sup>

The Huddlestons and Bostocks were devout Catholic families (several family members entered convents), yet expressions of piety within their letters are generally restricted to discussions of ill health and the body. Bostock's direct appeal to God revealed his understanding that all afflictions, and recoveries, were according to God's will. That this prayer was shared with his sister-in-law highlights the social nature of both letters and devotional practice.

Writers would also ask others to pray for them. In 1680, Elizabeth Rayner – who had suffered ill health previously – begged her antiquarian friend Ralph Thoresby for his prayers: though she resigned herself to God, 'I most earnestly intreat you to pray for me.'<sup>55</sup> Ralph Thoresby was a nonconformist who by the turn of the eighteenth century had conformed to the established church, and whose religious life was deeply shaped by discussions with friends, acquaintances, and co-religionists in his home city of Leeds.<sup>56</sup> In

<sup>51</sup> *The whole duty of prayer: containing devotions for every day in the week, and for several occasions, ordinary and extraordinary* (London, 1716), p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> East Sussex Record Office (ESRO), FRE/5388, Elizabeth Tucker to daughter Barbara, 27 June 1719.

<sup>53</sup> Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D4457/71, Esther Black to John Black II, 16 Jan. 1753.

<sup>54</sup> Cambridgeshire Record Office, K488/C1/MHb/10, Henry Bostock to Mary Huddleston, 24 Jan. 1786.

<sup>55</sup> Leeds Brotherton Library (LBL), YAS/MS6/3, letter to Ralph Thoresby from Elizabeth Rayner, 16 July 1680.

<sup>56</sup> Laura Sangha, 'Ralph Thoresby and individual devotion in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England', *Historical Research*, 92 (2019), pp. 139–59, at p. 143.

praying for one another, these pious friends hoped for God's intervention. Undertakings to pray for a correspondent were also given by other, less obviously pious, letter-writers who otherwise rarely discussed their devotional lives.<sup>57</sup> The early eighteenth-century letters of the Derbyshire solicitor Thomas Hollinshead are almost entirely devoid of religious content and focus primarily on legal matters and family relationships. Yet in letters to his father, Thomas habitually included the phrase, 'I. pray for yE Health' in his closing lines.<sup>58</sup> Francis Hollinshead had been suffering from back pain and these words were intended to soothe both directly – through the impact of reading these words of affection – and indirectly, in their supplication to God. Thomas's repetition of such short phrases might appear formulaic, yet he invoked prayers when he judged the most need: usually for his father but in rare cases for his siblings. Following the delivery of a child to his Sister Stanley, he assured his brother-in-law, 'I pray God continue her Health' and in an enclosed letter to his sister reassured her that 'I pray for yE health'.<sup>59</sup> Three years later, he heard the 'afflicting news' that an indisposition of his sister's continued, 'w<sup>ch</sup> I pray God remove'; his prayer was unequivocal.<sup>60</sup> Thomas's occasional but purposeful prayers on behalf of his family suggest his adherence to a providential framework in which God could directly intervene in urgent matters of the body.

The intrinsically social aspect of letters generated supportive networks of prayer. Many forms of pious writing lent themselves to the inward, meditative prayer focused on the writer's soul.<sup>61</sup> Yet, our research shows that letters were instrumental to the expression of what contemporaries saw as the social origin of 'mutual prayers' that forged 'the antient [sic] *friendship* of Christians'.<sup>62</sup> Just as 'the frequent echoes of phrases from the Prayer Book' in eighteenth-century diaries indicate the considerable extent of lay piety, so the inclusion of prayers in letters shows how embedded these texts were in people's lives, and specifically in their relational lives.<sup>63</sup> Importantly, our letters provide evidence of the sending of inter-faith prayers for the body. When his Jewish friend, Emanuel Mendes da Costa, badly scalded his leg in December 1757, Isaac Romilly, a businessman of Huguenot descent, used a letter to convey his concern:

We Hope & sincerely wish, that the  
fervent prayers, we daily offer to the Great God (the Wise  
author of the delights of our Hearts in this transitory life)

<sup>57</sup> Select references include: 'pray for your health', 'pray for you', 'pray for ye' = 9 letters; 'pray for me' = 6. Source: DB 25.5.23 (2,538 letters).

<sup>58</sup> Derbyshire Record Office (DRO), D231 M/B/8 [3], Thomas Hollinshead to his father, 15 May 1703, letter 3.

<sup>59</sup> DRO, D231 M/B/8 [41], Thomas Hollinshead to his brother Stanley, 8 Jan. 1704, letter 41; DRO, D231 M/B/8 [42], Thomas Hollinshead to Sister Stanley, 8 Jan. 1704, letter 42.

<sup>60</sup> DRO, D231 M/B/8 [136], Thomas Hollinshead to Sister Stanley, 10 Jan. 1708, letter 136.

<sup>61</sup> Ryrle, *Being Protestant*, pp. 313–14.

<sup>62</sup> William Law, *A serious call to a devout and holy life. Adapted to the state and condition of all orders of Christians* (London, 1729), pp. 411, 412.

<sup>63</sup> Jacob, *Lay people and religion*, p. 95.

for your speedy recovery, will grant us the Happiness of taking a Chearfull glass with you.<sup>64</sup>

In 1759 (ostensibly referring to a different ailment), da Costa wrote to Romilly, confirming the positive impact of his friend's concern:

I shall be proud of yours & Mrs Romilly's Calling on me to morrow morning & pray Dear Doctor let me tell me you cure me intirely by Sympathy I thank God I have no more pains since I have been in yours & Mrs Romillys Company.<sup>65</sup>

Romilly's prayers and sympathy, along with the promise of an imminent visit, provide comfort akin to a cure proffered by a medical practitioner.<sup>66</sup> That these two friends, one Jewish and one Protestant, exchanged prayers for recovery so easily demonstrates their shared framework for understanding God's intervention in bodily matters, as well as the accommodation of this within their polite correspondence.

Some letters contained even more concrete articulations of devotion, deploying biblical language or comprising excerpts from scripture. Not surprisingly, these appear in letters exchanged between those who frequently discussed their devotional lives, such as members of clergy families. The use of recognizable scriptural references developed shared understandings of health and recovery that were intelligible to author and recipient alike. Accordingly, in 1688, Matthew Henry wrote to his father Philip Henry (both clergymen ejected after 1662):

My wife was taken on Saturday night with an ill fit of y<sup>e</sup> Cholick, which much disturb'd her all night, and confin'd her yesterday, but praised bee God shee is pretty well this morning, and rested very well y<sup>e</sup> last night, tho' weeping endure for a night yet joy comes in y<sup>e</sup> morning.<sup>67</sup>

In the last line of this extract, Matthew referenced Psalm 30:5, which comments on the temporary nature of trials and the certainty of respite. Later that month, Philip replied to his son:

Your Mother, I bless God, is somewhat better, then shee hath been, but not quite wel. God fit us for all events, that wee are appointed to! Work while 'tis day, the night comes.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> British Library (BL), ADD MS 28542, Isaac Romilly to Emanuel Mendes da Costa, 15 Dec. 1757, fo. 27.

<sup>65</sup> BL, ADD MS 28542, Emanuel Mendes da Costa to Isaac Romilly, 28 July 1759, fo. 65.

<sup>66</sup> On the power of sympathy in letters to affect the body, see Karen Harvey, "'a kind of sympathy betwixt us': letters, feeling and the material body", in Goldsmith, Haggerty and Harvey, eds., *Letters and the body, 1700–1830*.

<sup>67</sup> Bodleian Library, Eng Lett e.29, Matthew Henry to Philip Henry, 24 Sept. 1688, fo. 81.

<sup>68</sup> Bodleian Library, Eng Lett e.27, Philip Henry to Matthew Henry, 28 Jan. 1688, fo. 60.

This final line references John 9:4 and was a passage that Philip recommended to readers of his *A method for prayer* (1710) who sought a petitionary prayer to encourage diligence in duty.<sup>69</sup> Such references similarly reinforced parental advice in a letter that Susanna Wesley wrote to her son John in 1731. After expressing concern about the health of an acquaintance Mr Morgan, Susanna explained:

This shews how necessary it is, for people (especially the young) to emprove the present Blessing of Health, & Strength, by laying a strong Foundation of Piety towards God, of submission, patience, and all other Christian Virtues before the Decline of Life, before the shadows of the Even lengthens.<sup>70</sup>

Susanna's use of 'before the shadows of the Even lengthens' is a reference to Psalm 102:11, a reminder of mortality. Wesley's quoting of familiar scripture underscored piety as a route to good health.

At times, there is an obvious prescriptive element to scriptural references. In 1742, Anglican Jane Johnson, a writer and the wife of vicar of Olney Woolsey Johnson, urged her cousin Mrs Garth not to spend 'to much time in Praying, Reading, Fasting & Self Examination', lest she 'destroy' her health. Instead, in what was likely a variation of Lamentations 3:33, 'For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men', Johnson reassured Garth that God was a merciful Father who would not willingly punish and advised her to ground her religious practice in the scriptures rather than in excessive and harmful devotion.<sup>71</sup> The proscriptive framing of ill health in terms of providence and scriptural references also appears in the early nineteenth century. As W Edwards instructed J Edwards in 1814,

The sickness you will find is neither mortal, nor dangerous – the best remedies are a trust in that Providence who watches over you abroad as well as at home & who cares for them that put their trust in Him.<sup>72</sup>

This is likely a variation of Proverbs 30:5, which describes God as a shield to those who trust in him. Such references reminded friends and family when they were misinterpreting or drifting away from the scriptures, to the possible detriment of body or soul.

Scriptural references tied together correspondents in other ways. Just as seventeenth-century prayer may have had a measurable somatic effect, so the inclusion of prayer in eighteenth-century letters evidently provided comfort to

<sup>69</sup> Matthew Henry, *A method for prayer, with scripture expressions proper to be us'd under each head* (London, 1710), p. 67.

<sup>70</sup> JRRIL, DDFW2/9, Susanna Wesley to John and Charles Wesley, 21 Feb. 1732, fo. 9.1r.

<sup>71</sup> Bodleian Library, MS Don. c. 190, Jane Johnson to Mrs Garth, 3 June 1742, fo. 17v.

<sup>72</sup> Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, GEN MSS 151 box 26, W Edwards to J Edwards, 17 Nov. 1814, fo. 1466.



recipients.<sup>73</sup> In 1746, Katherine Tylston, daughter of Philip Henry, wrote to her sister Sarah Savage, thanking her for writing and for ‘your prayers for mee which is a great comfort to mee, to share in the prayers of so many that have so good an Interest with that God from whom all Comfort comes’.<sup>74</sup> Acknowledging the tangible consolation she had obtained through reading her sister’s letter, Tylston pointedly reinforced her thanks with reference to the ‘God of all Comfort’ that appears in 2 Corinthians 1:3–5. In friendships firmly rooted in a shared faith, scriptural language underscored the confessional bond. Surviving in the late eighteenth-century collection of the Congregationalist Bateman family, for example, is Anna Allwood’s 1787 letter to her friend Rebekah Bateman:

I am now through Mercy getting <sup>better</sup> but still very weak, I wish the affliction may <sup>be</sup> sanctified, & that God who has so graciously Wisely & faithfully <sup>afflicted</sup> me may be Glorified. Blessed be His Name He does not willingly afflict, & when He does, it is that we may be made partakers of His Divine & Heavenly Nature; & if we suffer with Him we shall also reign with Him.<sup>75</sup>

The passage includes another variation of Lamentations 3:33 alongside 2 Timothy 2:12: ‘if we suffer, we shall also reign with him.’ For Bateman, influenced by the Church of England clergyman, George Whitefield, the leader of (Calvinist) Methodism, suffering was a prerequisite to being saved and many of her exchanges with fellow Congregationalists were firmly rooted in questions of salvation and bodily affliction.<sup>76</sup> The sharing of scriptural passages bound together co-believers and provided tangible comfort for body and soul.

### III

A belief in providence in matters of the body and mind was long-standing and persisted throughout the period. Of the letters, 122 refer to ‘providence’, spread evenly across the period 1675 to 1819.<sup>77</sup> Occasionally, providence was an explanation for ill health. In February 1676, Elizabeth Rayner reported to her friend, the antiquarian Ralph Thoresby (before he committed to the established church), that ‘his hand hath been so long upon me in a strange & unusual distemper’.<sup>78</sup> This is a very rare comment that explained illness by providence. More common throughout this period was an acknowledgement that God’s will had brought good health, not bad, a point evident in letters that were otherwise devoid of religious content. In a letter of 24 May 1698, John Rawlinson briefly reported to his nephew, ‘I am still much out of health

<sup>73</sup> Sophie Mann, ‘“A double care”: prayer as therapy in early modern England’, *Social History of Medicine*, 33 (2020), pp. 1055–76.

<sup>74</sup> Bodleian Library, Eng Letter e.29, Sister Tylston to Sarah Henry (Savage), Aug. 1746, fo. 150.

<sup>75</sup> Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, OSB MSS 32 box 1, folder 1 [2], Anna Allwood to Rebekah Bateman, 4 June 1787.

<sup>76</sup> Whyman, *Pen and the people*, pp. 134, 144.

<sup>77</sup> Source: DB 25.5.23 (2,538 letters).

<sup>78</sup> LBL, YAS/MS6/4, Elizabeth Rayner to Ralph Thoresby, 27 Feb. 1675/6.

And have Been for a great while But I hope in God I shall be better.<sup>79</sup> In the 1740s, Dorothy Wright commiserated with her daughter Catherine Elliot on family illness: 'I Hartley wish them all well over if Pleas God.'<sup>80</sup> John Yate similarly concluded a letter to his business associate in London in April 1750, though with a reference to his own health: 'hope this will find you in health, as, I thank God, I am at present'.<sup>81</sup> In the 1760s, Thomas Holman opened his letter to Mary Collier with the hope that it, 'will meet you in a full Enjoyment of Health which I pray God grant you a long Continuance off'.<sup>82</sup> While at the end of the century, in October 1796, Margaret Williamson wrote to Elizabeth Forth, wife of the Reverend John Forth, that though she had been ill all summer, 'thro a kind and indulgent providence for these ten Weeks past have been gradually recovering from my indisposition'.<sup>83</sup> That Williamson's language may have been shaped by her writing to the wife of an Anglican vicar reminds us that letter-writers designed their words for specific readers. Yet, the other examples were not exchanged with clergy families, and, indeed, appear within collections of letters that rarely utilize religious language except in reference to health. They all express a sense of a directed and 'kind' providence intervening in bodily matters. Such expressions have been interpreted as 'almost as a convention' rather than expressions of piety.<sup>84</sup> Yet, eighteenth-century men and women knew that repetition of the formulaic was integral to religious devotion. As William Law said of regular prayers, they may begin as 'only *form* and *outward* compliance; yet our hearts would by degrees learn the *language* of our mouths'.<sup>85</sup> Repetition of prayers in letters thus held tremendous potency and suggest that letter-writers continued to associate the fortunes of health with providential intervention throughout the eighteenth century.

Statements of resignation to God's will persist throughout the eighteenth century, though are notably more common in dissenting collections.<sup>86</sup> The Quaker merchant John Eliot, writing to his wife Mary in 1765, opened a letter with his assurance that he was:

truly glad to hear thy Cold was better, & that  
thou wast otherwise bravely in Health. May the

<sup>79</sup> Barrow: 16: 24 May 1698: JR to WR. William Rawlinson appears to have been a Quaker. See Cumbria Archive and Local Studies Centre, Barrow, BD HJ 89/Bundle 3/4, Certificate of fidelity to the Government of William Rawlinson of Graythwaite Hall, a Quaker, certified at Hawkshead, 23 Oct. [1723].

<sup>80</sup> Sheffield Archives, LD1576/1 [11], Dorothy Wright to Catherine Elliott, 27 May 1747.

<sup>81</sup> HL, HE369, John Yate to Edmund Herbert at Gray's Inn, 21 Apr. 1750, fo. 1r.

<sup>82</sup> ESRO, SAY 2185, Thomas Holman to Mary Collier, c. 1760s.

<sup>83</sup> York City Archives, MFP/2/7, bill from Mrs Margaret Williamson at Berwick upon Tweed to Mrs Forth, 17 Oct. 1796, fo. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Alun Withey, *Physick and the family: health, medicine and care in Wales, 1600-1750* (Manchester, 2013), p. 49.

<sup>85</sup> William Law, *A practical treatise upon Christian perfection* (3rd edn, London, 1734), p. 276.

<sup>86</sup> This echoes work which finds providential explanations for disease in early puritan and later Methodist Welsh sources, though not in others. See Withey, *Physick and the family*, pp. 49, 132.

Divine protection be with thee during my Absence  
and grant that we may meet ~~in~~<sup>again</sup> together in safety.<sup>87</sup>

Unable to provide care for his wife in person, he invoked the 'Divine Protection' of God. As Naomi Pullin has shown, Quakers' interpretations of providential intervention 'had a distinctive character' as they cast themselves as particularly deserving of God's protection and interpreted recovery from sickness as evidence of God's benevolence to his chosen people.<sup>88</sup> In another letter, Eliot informed his wife that he was well thanks to this 'Divine Protection', telling her: 'we have not suffer'd at all in our Healths, so far as appears, thro' the fervour of Providence'.<sup>89</sup> The Baptist Stutterd brothers from the north of England shared an understanding of providence as similarly benevolent. As Thomas Stutterd, bookkeeper and Baptist preacher, observed during his wife Mary's 'late Trial of Small Pox' in 1789: 'I believe divine providence has indeed evidently given you Strength according to your day'.<sup>90</sup> Stutterd's emphasis on suffering ('Trial') may have been influenced by his experiences as a travelling preacher who worried that accidents might befall him; his letters are certainly the most pious, serious-minded, and anxious amongst those of the Stutterd brothers.<sup>91</sup> Yet, this family's letters palpably express the Baptist emphasis on the body as the instrument of conversion and subsequent salvation, as well as the means and the measure of spiritual purity. For Baptists, salvation was the outcome of physical and emotional struggle.<sup>92</sup> The Stutterds were part of the revival of Particular (Calvinist) Baptists.<sup>93</sup> Their intense scrutiny of the suffering body set out on the pages of letters can be read as an urgent search for signs of God's atonement.

A similarly prominent role is given to providence in the extensive correspondence of the Black family of merchants, an Ulster family with both conforming and Presbyterian members.<sup>94</sup> Presbyterians were Calvinist, holding that the elect would be brought to salvation through the Holy Spirit; at the end of the eighteenth century, Presbyterian evangelicalism envisaged the

<sup>87</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), LMA/ACC/1017/1034, John Eliot to Mary Eliot, 30 Sept. 1765.

<sup>88</sup> Naomi Pullin, 'Providence, punishment and identity formation in the late-Stuart Quaker community, c. 1650–1700', *The Seventeenth Century*, 31 (2016), pp. 471–94, at pp. 487, 475.

<sup>89</sup> LMA/ACC/1017/1032, John Eliot to Mary Eliot, 25 Dec. 1763, fo. 1; LMA/ACC/1017/1037, John Eliot to Mary Eliot, 11 July 1770.

<sup>90</sup> HL, SFP261, Thomas Stutterd to Mary Stutterd, 22 Mar. 1789, fo. 1.

<sup>91</sup> See HL, SFP591, Thomas at Mansfield to Mary, 1 June 1794. See Helen Berry, 'Sense and singularity: the social experiences of John Marsh and Thomas Stutterd in late-Georgian England', in Jonathan Barry and Henry French, eds., *Identity and agency in England, 1500–1800* (London, 2004), pp. 178–99.

<sup>92</sup> Janet Moore Lindman, *Bodies of belief: Baptist community in early America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), esp. pp. 60–5; Karen E. Smith, 'Baptists', in Andrew Thompson, ed., *The Oxford history of Protestant dissenting traditions, II: The long eighteenth century, c. 1689 – c. 1828* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 54–76.

<sup>93</sup> The Stutterd collection includes letters that the Colne Baptist Church received addressed to Particular Baptist Churches. See also [www.edintone.com/directoriesand\\_lists/baptist-magazine-1811/](http://www.edintone.com/directoriesand_lists/baptist-magazine-1811/).

<sup>94</sup> See James Livesey, *Civil society and empire: Ireland and Scotland in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world* (New Haven, CT, 2009), pp. 128–53.

agency of the Lord working on the heart and the spirit of the faithful.<sup>95</sup> It also worked directly on the body, the Black letters suggest. In the spring of 1805, Black reported to his adult son (Mathew) that three months of bowel problems were finally over: 'At length by the goodness of God and sobriety of regimen I am restored in a great measure to my usual good health.'<sup>96</sup> Here, providence might be combined with secular treatments to ensure health, indicative of an eighteenth-century framework of 'moral medicine' shaped by systems of regimen that were revitalized at the end of the century.<sup>97</sup> That a Christian attention to the soul melded neatly with ascendant ideas of personal management belies overarching secularization narratives of the body.<sup>98</sup>

Both conforming and nonconforming Protestants assigned agency to providence in the case of recovery. Another rare attribution of ill health to God's will was evident in the letters of Eliezer Isaac Keyser, an Ashkenazi Jewish man living in Hampstead. In a letter to his cousin, Mrs Keyser, in January 1818, Keyser discussed a recent bout of ill health, expressing gratitude for her care during

my deplorable affliction which  
it has pleas'd the almighty to furnish me with  
therefore I must not murmur against his will, and which I attempt  
but Cannot erace from my mind, may the Lord  
in heaven turn his wrath from us and prolong  
our future lives in peace health and happiness.<sup>99</sup>

Keyser's expression of hope that the Creator would bring them longevity and health adopts a prayer-like composition, witnessed by both his cousin and by God. Keyser's use of the term 'affliction' to refer to a physical trial was rooted within Jewish and Christian discourse and was frequently used by letter-writers, appearing in ninety-six letters dating from 1675 to 1818.<sup>100</sup> Keyser bore his affliction without complaint but nonetheless hoped that God's 'wrath' would be directed elsewhere. Ill health was here a product of God's displeasure which appears to have been applied generally rather than in response to sinful behaviour.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Holmes, 'Personal conversion, revival, and the Holy Spirit: Presbyterian evangelicalism in early nineteenth-century Ulster', in Coffey, ed., *Heart religion*, pp. 181–6.

<sup>96</sup> HL, HM49147, James Black (c) in London to Mathew Black, 17 Apr. 1805.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Robert Robertson, *An essay on fevers* (London, 1790); Kevin Siena, 'Pliable bodies: the moral biology of health and disease', in Carole Reeves, ed., *A cultural history of the human body in the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 34–52.

<sup>98</sup> For example, Michael MacDonald, 'The secularization of suicide in England 1660–1800', *Past & Present*, 111 (1986), pp. 50–100; Penelope J. Corfield, "'An age of infidelity": secularization in eighteenth-century England', *Social History*, 39 (2014), pp. 229–47; Kathleen Marie Reynolds, 'Sickness in correspondence: gentry letter writing and the subject of health in eighteenth-century Yorkshire, County Durham, and Northumberland' (Ph.D. thesis, Durham, 2018), p. 220.

<sup>99</sup> Jewish Museum London, C2002.28.5, Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Keyser, Jan. 5578, fo. 9.

<sup>100</sup> Source: DB 25.5.23 (2,538 letters).

The more acute bodily events and experiences were understood and communicated in religious terms. Death was often the prompt for a collection of letters that otherwise made scant reference to religion to assign agency to providence. In 1696, the conforming Richard Lewthwaite joined in shared commiseration with his brother John at the 'Sad news god kows y<sup>t</sup> God Almighty was pleased to take Bro Antony Into his mercy'.<sup>101</sup> The same stark resignation to God's will can be found over a century later in Miss Yates's description of her brother Henry's death in 1801 following a long illness: 'I trusted for a recovery from the gradual decline that enfeebled him. But Gods will be done.'<sup>102</sup> In many cases, references to providence were as much about God's will *not* to take a life, as they were about being well. A letter sent by John Lewthwaite to his cousin, also John Lewthwaite, reported, 'Bless God for his goodness have had our health very well of late.' Yet, this letter was sending condolences to a father on the loss of his son, the forty-two-year-old Gilfrid Lewthwaite who had drowned at Whitehaven in July 1779.<sup>103</sup> Also apparently from a conforming family, Rebecca Cooper wrote to her sister Catherine Elliot in 1761 grateful that she had been saved while others had been lost:

[we] heartily Congratulate you and all our friends upon your safe recovery for had it pleased God to have taken you away from us as has been the lot of my Poor Sister Frost it would have been a great Shock to Nature...but thank the Lord that is not the case, for though we have lost a dear & valuable friend yet still we have great reason to be thankfull for his goodness to you.<sup>104</sup>

Appearing in a collection of letters in which religion and faith are rarely touched upon, Cooper acknowledged that God's will underpinned both life and death, using the letter almost as a thanksgiving prayer for God's preservation of her sister.

It is striking that although these writers link good health with God's will, only Elizabeth Rayner and Eliezer Keyser expressly linked poor health with God's will (in 1676 and 1818). Furthermore, in our entire corpus of (currently) over 2,500 letters, we have identified only two in which God's will is explicitly understood as punishment for sin. These both date from the early 1730s and are in collections which frequently discuss religious matters. In the first, the grieving mother Elizabeth Turner writes to her mother-in-law describing the death of her son as 'a bitter cup which our Heavenly Father has put into our hands'; they will drink from this cup because, 'I know I have greatly

<sup>101</sup> Whitehaven Archives (WA), YDLEW/13/3/1/3, Richard Lewthwaite to John Lewthwaite, 21 May 1696. Surviving parish registers for Whicham and Kirkby Ireleth suggest that the Lewthwaites were Anglican. See WA, YDLEW/13/2/1/17, and WA, YDLEW/13/2/2/9.

<sup>102</sup> WA, YDX 424/1/18, M Yates to Miss Isabella Taylor, July 1801, fo. 2.

<sup>103</sup> WA, YDLEW/13/3/2/67, John Lewthwaite to John Lewthwaite, 14 Dec. 1779.

<sup>104</sup> Sheffield Archives, LD1576/2 [5], Rebecca Cooper to Catherine Elliott, 15 Sept. 1761.

provoked Him by my Sins.<sup>105</sup> In the second, an excoriating letter from the clergyman Samuel Wesley to his son-in-law Richard Ellison, Wesley informs Ellison that the death of his inebriated father after falling from a horse was an act of God: 'At length God wou'd bear no longer but has now begun at y<sup>e</sup> head by cropping off in a dreadfull manner y<sup>e</sup> top wither'd branch of your Incurrigible Family of Drunkards.'<sup>106</sup> Wesley's alarming turn of phrase had an incontrovertibly moralizing purpose. That these references concern death underscores that God was believed to act directly and in response to sinful behaviour only *in extremis*. In familiar letters across the eighteenth century, it was much more common for providence to be discussed without an indication of its moral significance.<sup>107</sup> This accords with recent findings for a 'hopeful and largely benign providence – whilst it was not always comforting – appears in contrast to earlier beliefs in providence that provided some comfort, but which primarily focused on punishment for sin'.<sup>108</sup> The force of providence in recovery from ill health was more evident in dissenting collections, but letters from all denominations reflect the belief that a benevolent God alleviated suffering and determined when an individual would leave this world.

#### IV

For some writers, letters were an opportunity to discuss how providence interacted with treatments for ill health. In 1778, Sarah Clegg informed her daughter Rebekah Bateman that 'last Month your Father & I came to Gatley on purpose for his health'. She added that they were 'thankfull to the Almighty [sic] for Blessing the Means...for since we came here he is much better'.<sup>109</sup> A belief in the efficacy of God's intervention grounded in understandings of general providence and entirely consonant with modern medical treatments was long-standing. Clegg's acknowledgement of God's role in blessing the 'means' of recovery is evocative of a much earlier letter written by Anglican Anna Maria Turner to her father in 1698:

I must add my earnest prayers that God by his word of  
Blessing would make the means you have or may yet further use  
Effectuall for your health & continuance.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Kent History and Library Centre, U1015/C140/1, Elizabeth Turner to Anna Maria Turner, 1731.

<sup>106</sup> JRRIL, DDWF1/10, Samuel Wesley to Richard Ellison, Mar. 1732.

<sup>107</sup> This is somewhat different from early modern Protestant providence discussed in Walsham, *Providence in early modern England*, though accords with Walsham's view that providence was not smothered in the eighteenth century (pp. 332–4).

<sup>108</sup> Hannah Barker, Carys Brown, Kate Gibson, and Jeremy Gregory, *Faith in the town: lay religion in northern England, c. 1740–1830* (forthcoming), ch. 5, 'Business and faith'.

<sup>109</sup> Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, OSB MSS 32 box 2, folder 24 [1], Sarah Clegg to Rebekah Bateman, 9 Mar. 1778.

<sup>110</sup> Kent History and Library Centre, U1015/C16/3, Anna Maria Turner to Thomas Papillon, 3 Dec. 1698.

Turner uses the letter not only to convey her sincere prayers for her father's good health but to reinforce God's influence over the efficacy of treatment. Those means included specific medical applications. In 1737, Simon Foster wrote to Philadelphia Frewen regarding a medical treatment for pain in his face:

I have had  
a severe pain in my face...took the Bark  
but found no releaf Bless God I hope  
it's gone of <sup>now</sup> for I have been better  
this 2 days.<sup>111</sup>

The bark was not efficacious and Foster appeared to thank God for the alleviation of his suffering, yet there is no suggestion that trust in God's will was antithetical to taking the bark. Even those who expressed the strongest belief in providence could align this with medical intervention. His wife Mary now close to childbirth, the Baptist preacher Thomas Stutterd urged her to avail herself of the choices laid out by God for her safe delivery: 'Let not an ill judged Modesty or fear of Expence, ...deter you from making use of the best & safest means providence has [del] set before you – We should always use the best means, but trust in the almighty for Success.'<sup>112</sup> Ultimately, though, God would trump any doctor: 'Look to the great Physician for that literal & spiritual Health', he later advised his wife.<sup>113</sup> Thomas here deployed a recurring trope in dissenting writing of God as 'the great Physician'.<sup>114</sup> As with another preacher, the Methodist John Wesley, who also wrote of 'the Great Physician', there was no contradiction between religious and medical approaches to the body. For Baptists and Methodists alike, suffering was the outcome of Original Sin and could bring the believer closer to God, however mercifully God had provided the means to alleviate this.<sup>115</sup>

One of the most tangible 'means' which letter-writers discussed in relation to God's will was the process of smallpox inoculation. Several of the letter-writers in our corpus debated the religious foundations for inoculation: did the process interfere with God's will, or had God himself provided it for humanity? In June 1763, the Quaker Mary Eliot was ill with smallpox, and a fellow Quaker, Thomas Whitehead, wrote to her husband John:

Oh what a happy Reflection have you in trusting in his  
good Providence in this particular...and in not Dareing to do  
as some have presum'd to Inflict their Bodies with a  
Hazardous Distemper which otherways ought never have  
happed to them.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>111</sup> ESRO, FRE/5400, Simon Foster to Philadelphia Frewen, 17 Aug. 1737.

<sup>112</sup> HL, SFP261, Thomas Stutterd to Mary Stutterd, 22 Mar 1789, fo. 1.

<sup>113</sup> HL, SFP274, Thomas Stutterd to Mary Stutterd, 14 May 1789, fos. 1–2.

<sup>114</sup> Porter and Porter, *In sickness and in health*, p. 174.

<sup>115</sup> Mack, *Heart religion*, pp. 178–82.

<sup>116</sup> LMA/ACC/1017/1047, Thomas Whitehead to John Eliot, 30 June 1763.



Whitehead praised the Eliots for not receiving any form of smallpox inoculation, instead accepting God's will that Mary be afflicted by smallpox. The Catholic Huddleston family, writing ten years later, took quite a different attitude to inoculation. In September 1772, Mary Bostock wrote to her sister-in-law Mary Huddleston regarding Huddleston's child: 'Perhaps you think of innoculating her...I hope it will Please Providence to order it for ye best...God alone knows best & to him I Recommend it for there is no Foreseeing Events.'<sup>117</sup> It later appeared that Huddleston had decided to inoculate her child, because Bostock's next letter stated:

Thank God your D<sup>r</sup> little Girl is in Perfect Health & [h]as begun her Preparation under the Direction of Mr Nelson...for her Innoculation... wee think Mr Nellson an Extreme Carefull man & I think in y<sup>s</sup> affair wee Can not be in better hands Pray God a good success.<sup>118</sup>

For the Catholic Huddlestons, inoculation was not at odds with providence; indeed, they appealed to God for the procedure's efficacy and viewed the physician, Mr Nelson, as acting in accordance with God's will. There is no definitive doctrinal explanation for Whitehead's and Bostock's different opinions – several Quaker physicians were supportive of smallpox inoculation for example – and these letters indicate that families interpreted the workings of providence in different ways.<sup>119</sup> Through these social forms of writing, correspondents could develop distinctive viewpoints on the relationship between medical treatment and providence.

Medical treatments would at some point be exhausted of their efficacy, though. In 1798, the Unitarian Thomas Nicholson informed his sister Boardman:

Our dear sister Hatfield still continues in a very weak state – yet must daily grow still weaker. She has ease from Laudanum 'till its effects are over, ...Nothing now can be done for her by human power, but administering lulling medicine & kind attention.<sup>120</sup>

Sister Hatfield's family attempted to alleviate her suffering (by nursing her and administering Laudanum) but the impotence of 'human power' suggested that only providential intercession was now at work. On the challenge of identifying divine intervention, there was no single Unitarian view.<sup>121</sup> In his relatively reserved reference to the limitations of human power, we might observe

<sup>117</sup> Cambridgeshire Record Office, K488/C1/MHB/12, Mary Bostock to Mary Huddleston, 17 Sept. 1772.

<sup>118</sup> Cambridgeshire Record Office, K488/C1/MHB/13, Mary Bostock to Mary Huddleston, 31 Oct. 1772.

<sup>119</sup> Porter and Porter, *In sickness and in health*, pp. 175–6.

<sup>120</sup> JRRIL, ENG 1041, Thomas Nicholson to Sister Boardman, 4 Jan. 1798, fo. 28.

<sup>121</sup> Clark, 'Providence, predestination and progress', pp. 585–6.

Nicholson's preference for 'rational ethics' over 'dogma' at which Unitarians aimed.<sup>122</sup> Nicholson understood that at this late stage in her decline, medical treatments had been exhausted and her fate lay with God. In common with Nicholson, a profound belief in the ultimate power of God in matters of life and death was unshaken throughout the long eighteenth century.

## V

Religion was a commonplace register for the discussion of bodily matters throughout the long eighteenth century, both for the evidently pious as well as for those individuals who otherwise made little reference to religion or faith. The physical body encouraged recourse to providence, a public discussion of doctrine, and the shared expression of devotion. The ongoing force of religion in people's lives was thus intimately tied to their embodied experiences. Though this was sometimes more visible in Protestant nonconformist letters, there are important and enduring similarities across collections of families of different denominational affiliations, particularly in the frequent references to providence. Such references – acknowledging God's will and offering thanks to Him – are evidence of a continued and profound belief in God's ability to intervene in bodily matters. Writers, Christian and Jewish alike, trusted in God to preserve and protect the health of their absent loved ones, and in many instances letter-writers prayed for one another. Even more concrete is the use of specific scriptural references, which tend to feature in the letters of individuals who wrote more generally about their devotional lives or were members of clergy families. Yet lay people habitually reached for religious language and the tenets of faith in matters of the body, health, illness, decline, and death. As they appear in these letters, they demonstrate that lay understandings cannot be encapsulated by rigid categories of 'general' or 'particular' providence: resignation in the face of God's benevolent will was most common, but the inclusion of prayers indicates a belief in appealing directly to God, and so too were inoculation and other forms of medical treatment viewed as means provided by God's providence. Spiritual and bodily health continued to be intertwined, in expressions of both causality and cure, throughout the long eighteenth century. Letters not only reflect but maintain this widely shared and deeply held religious framework for understanding the body. For people of all denominations, the exchange of familiar letters was a significant means by which lay people shared understandings of the workings of faith, particularly in relation to the body. Friends and family reinforced religious ties by sharing references to God, scriptural phrases, and advice that shored up bodily and spiritual health. In times of separation, letters also enabled eighteenth-century men and women to exchange care and consolation, for both body and soul. Moreover, letters created a network of prayer with the intention to heal and protect the physically separated bodies of friends and family.

<sup>122</sup> Ruth Watts, *Gender, power and the Unitarians in England, 1760–1860* (London and New York, NY, 1998), p. 3.

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