God and Mrs Thatcher: The Battle for Britain's Soul

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God and Mrs Thatcher, as Eliza Filby herself makes clear, is not a biography. ‘God’, as represented by Church of England bishops, the Synod and Anglican congregations, the moral lobby, popular morality and the international Christian community, is as much the subject of Filby’s book as Thatcher is. By rejecting a narrowly focused personal study she provides an analysis that moves beyond the political commitments which continue to shape accounts of Britain’s first female Prime Minister – something Charles Moore has praised in his review of this book, published by The Spectator [2]. Filby’s introduction describes her book as an exploration of dual and interrelated processes: the ‘politicisation of Christianity’ and the ‘Christianisation of politics’ (p.xvii). This balance is retained throughout, and works to develop a richly contextualised study which historicises, rather than demonising or mythologising, an understudied element of Thatcher’s political profile. Too often Thatcher’s religiosity is dismissed as ‘window-dressing’ for unpalatable economic policies. Importantly, Filby consistently ties Thatcher’s religious values to the religious identity of the British (or more accurately, English), nation. This is not ‘great person history’. Though Filby does partly attribute the hastened demise of Christian Britain to Thatcherite glorification of materialism, which she argues encouraged financial irresponsibility and created a culture of selfishness and credit, the thrust of the book is not about what Thatcher ‘changed’, but what she represented. As such, Filby asks a methodological question: how might broader social, political and cultural questions be helpfully approached through the exploration of a single, public figure?

God and Mrs Thatcher is highly readable. The ‘war of words’ between church and state was largely conducted through the popular media, providing Filby with a rich source of colourful evidence. Chapters open with encapsulating quotations – hooks for the analysis to follow. The book also includes a number of images, which, given the widely recognised (if under-explored) importance of Thatcher’s appearance, are not a trivial addition, although the print quality sometimes obscures the finer details. It will therefore hold a broad appeal, with much to offer the general reader as well as the academic specialist. Filby covers a lot of ground without alienating those who lack a developed understanding of 20th century Christianity, either institutionally or theologically. The index is detailed and the text is thoroughly footnoted – helpful editorial considerations for the student reader.

Commencing with an analysis of Thatcher’s provincial childhood, the chapters broaden in conceptual and...
geographical scope to the extent that the book’s final quarter considers, for example, Thatcher’s morally contestable position on apartheid and the international profile of Terry Waite, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s rather extraordinary diplomatic envoy. The well-known story of Thatcher’s life as ‘the grocer’s daughter’ is enriched by Filby’s careful analysis of Alfred Roberts’ sermon notes. Connections drawn between the sentiments expressed in these notes and the moral code espoused by Thatcher years later brings the legacy of her father’s Methodism into striking relief. As Filby stresses throughout, the social consequences of Thatcher’s policies should not be taken – as they were by the contemporary Church of England leadership – to suggest the superficiality, or instrumentality of her professed faith. Despite her formal adoption of her husband Dennis’s Anglicanism, her father’s individualistic non-conformity remained a life-long influence. His commitment to individual freedom, emphasis on individual responsibility, and belief in the transformative power of hard work would find reflection in his daughter’s vision of a nation saved by economic revival.

Moving away from Grantham, Filby then considers Thatcher’s life as an undergraduate at Oxford. Even as students there was no love lost between the then Margaret Roberts and her future Archbishop; Runcie is said to remember her ‘as rather tubby, with rosy cheeks. Not my sort of girl’ (p. 49). This more biographically focused element of the text is interwoven with wider, social considerations. Runcie’s access to the Establishment through his experience of ‘a good war’, for example, suggests the extent to which the obstacles imposed by Thatcher’s class were compounded by her gender. Filby goes on to explore the moral consensus inherent in the development of the welfare state. The key role of Church of England figures in the welfare state’s construction is used to suggest an affinity between Church leadership and British welfarism, making explicit the implicit moral, and specifically Christian, underpinnings of the British welfare system. A broader cultural context for the ‘right wing turn’ is then established; the ‘certainty’ offered by figures such as Whitehouse and Powell, as well as economic liberals more generally is contrasted with the increasingly ambiguous position of the Church of England on central Christian issues. A tension is established between Anglican laity and Church leadership: Filby quotes an anonymous priest who told the Yorkshire Post in 1983 that ‘[The] average Anglican preaching today is rather like Guardian readers talking to Telegraph readers’, usefully indicating Thatcher’s populist credentials (p. 182). The activity of bishops and the voting record of the Lords Spiritual – who cast only 27 per cent of their votes between 1979 and 1990 in support of the Conservative government – demonstrate the gulf between Thatcher’s government and the one time ‘Tory party at prayer’. Although Filby is keen to emphasise that the roots of this gulf emerged long before Thatcher’s premiership, separation culminated, perhaps, in 1985, with David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool, widely reported as having said it was impossible to be both a Christian and a Conservative. As a footnote explains, this was a misquotation. Sheppard had actually claimed it was difficult to locate thoughtful Christians on the Right. Such wilful misreporting, however, serves only to illustrate media interest in, and widespread perceptions of, a church/government rift. The ‘marketability’ of this conflict is used by Filby to suggest a degree of cultural investment in Britain’s Christian identity, or at the least a strange dualism which saw the figureheads of a religion most people had rejected as a credible subject of headline news. The book’s later chapters adopt an international perspective, exploring the west’s crusade against communism, the Church’s increasing involvement with international politics and the 1982 papal visit. Popular toleration of Catholicism is used to indicate the weakening of British Anglicanism and the beginning of a shift towards Britain’s acceptance of a multi-faith identity. As such, the Church of England was forced to redefine its role, appointing itself as ‘the spiritual head of a multi-faith society’ (p. 330). The fostering of inter-faith cooperation, which Filby suggests did more to aid integration than secular multiculturalism, sought to demonstrate the Church of England’s social significance whilst simultaneously developing a coalition of religious groups to defend faith against secularism.

Filby engages with the Church of England beyond its strictly religious significance. Throughout the 1980s the Church’s involvement with public life increased to the extent that it was accused of neglecting its spiritual purpose. Thatcher herself, of course, told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in a pointed criticism of the church’s ‘encroachment’ into the political domain, that ‘Christianity is about spiritual redemption, not social reform’ (p. 23). But the lingering relevance of churchmen is not primarily
presented as a consequence of their politicisation; rather, that they were afforded a political platform at all is used to suggest the tenacity of an English Christian identity. Drawing on sociologist Grace Davies’ idea of ‘believing without belonging’, Filby argues for a residual Christianity that continued to shape national self-perception long after actual church attendance plummeted. Stuart Blanch, Archbishop of York, is quoted as saying that in 1981 Britain remained ‘Christian by instinct ... if we have any spiritual aspirations they are Christian aspirations, if there is a name that still evokes some responses in our hearts it is the name of Christ’ (p. 166). This sort of uncritical confidence in the endurance of a religiously defined British character was certainly reflected in, and encouraged by, Thatcher’s celebration of the nation’s ‘Judeo-Christian’ tradition.

Filby also emphasises the Church’s discomfort with the kind of moral issues campaigners such as Mary Whitehouse championed. Indeed, the Church of England’s refusal to support Whitehouse in her moral crusades was a key feature of Whitehouse’s self-presentation as a lone woman taking on moral decay in the face of institutional timidity and/or corruption. A similar anti-institutionalism, of course, was integral to Thatcher’s public image, though I would contest Filby’s claim that Whitehouse and Thatcher were similar in ‘demeanour’ (p. 103). They may have rallied support from the same social and cultural locations, and drawn on similar sentiments in order to do this. They may, as Filby points out, have been suburban mothers with handbags. But it is hard to imagine Thatcher addressing constituents through a megaphone whilst poking out of the roof of a make-shift campaign bus, as Whitehouse did in 1987. Thatcher famously lacked a sense of humour; in contrast, Whitehouse was willingly interviewed by the satirical alter ego of Australian comedian Gary McDonald. She was not squeamish, and claimed to be ‘all for sex’. Of course this discrepancy is partly explained by their differing roles, but Whitehouse’s moral conservatism (and barely disguised political Conservatism) should not obscure her divergence from the stereotypically formal image of the ‘right wing woman’, to which Thatcher more generally subscribed.

The gulf between Thatcher’s ‘promotion of individual liberty’ and Whitehouse’s ‘fight for increasing moral regulation’, combined with the pragmatic governmental response to the AIDs crisis, is used by Filby to underline the limits of the New Right’s moral conservatism (p. 206). This is not a new argument; the pragmatism of Thatcher’s government has been stressed by historians such as Richard Vinen, with whom Filby has worked. But given Filby’s emphasis on the authenticity of Thatcher’s faith, her relationship with the moral lobby is significant. Thatcher may have criticised her ‘wet’ bishops but she too was ‘soft’ on sexual morality. For Filby, however, this does not undermine her religious commitment so much as underline the force of her Christian individualism. This individualism, of course, was most frequently invoked in relation to economic policies widely regarded as elevating opportunity above protection, at the expense of society’s most vulnerable members. The sanctity of free will, however, was used to undermine the moral argument for statist intervention more broadly. As Filby quotes Thatcher as telling the Daily Telegraph in 1978:

For the Christian there can be no social or political panaceas, no easy escapes from personal responsibility achieved by collectivising guilt or virtue. The true ends of temporal life lie beyond it, and, though the tyrannical State may diminish virtue, the benevolent State cannot procure it (p. 131).

Exploring strands of Christian thought beyond those espoused by the high profile Church of England leadership enables Filby to reconcile Thatcher’s faith with what were (and are) loudly condemned as ‘non-Christian’ Thatcherite politics. The influence of Brian Griffiths, for example, Thatcher’s notoriously pious head of policy, is significant. Born into a Welsh Baptist family, he proffered not only an ethical case for capitalism but, as Filby argues, an explicitly Christian case, rooted solidly in scripture. Thatcher may have been naive in her belief that a richer society would result in a more giving society – the regret she later expressed for not having taxed the rich more seems to acknowledge this – but, as Filby’s analysis draws out, the refusal of high profile Church of England figures to acknowledge the legitimate biblical basis from which she was arguing gave credibility to new-Right allegations of liberal Anglicanism’s intolerance. It is in this context that Thatcher came to rely on the conservative Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jacobovitz for spiritual
legitimisation, a fact that is frequently referenced but rarely considered within the broader context of shifting church-state relations. Thatcher was vocal in her respect for the Jewish community throughout her political career, and promoted a record number of Jewish colleagues to senior positions, but it is unlikely that the Chief Rabbi would have assumed the significance that he did had Church of England leadership been less hostile towards either Thatcherite politics or the theology employed in their defence.

The sense of a Church increasingly estranged from its traditional support base is reiterated throughout; a largely middle-class, conservative laity felt alienated by the liberal socialism championed by its leadership, providing a receptive audience for Thatcher’s brand of traditionalist, individualist Christianity that sought to restore moral certainty and accommodate and encourage financial success. I would therefore have been interested to read more about the influence of Thatcher’s Christianity on her public image. This is occasionally alluded to in passing. For example, T. E. Utley is said to have encouraged Thatcher to refer to her personal faith in public statements, the speechwriter George Urban urged her to adopt a tone of ‘moral outrage’ and Harvey Thomas, who had spent 15 years organising ‘conversion’ tours for the American evangelist Billy Graham, was Thatcher’s head of communications (p. 276). Elsewhere, however, Filby argues that ‘sermonising’ was of little electoral benefit in a UK context, given the lack of a British equivalent of the Christian right in the USA. This does not seem to take into account the full extent to which Christianity was tied to traditional conceptions of Englishness integral to Thatcherite discourse, despite popular attachment to a religiously-inflected ‘Englishness’ being drawn out through Filby’s analysis of proposed amendments to Sunday trading hours. Nor does it recognise the potential ‘capital’ of Thatcherite ‘sermonising’ as a rejection of the increasingly politicised theology espoused by a Church whose leadership seemed preoccupied with the social needs of the poor above the spiritual needs of their comfortably-off congregations. Given the breadth of Filby’s analysis it is perhaps inevitable that she will raise issues that cannot be fully developed. Testament to its scope and originality, God and Mrs Thatcher offers a number of possibilities for further study, of which the issue of Christianity and public image – both nationally and internationally – is just one.

In her introduction Filby claims that a significant motivation in writing about Thatcher was to ‘consign [her] to the past and locate her place within it rather than see her as an ahistorical phenomenon of either saintly or devilish proportions’ (p. xx). My own sense is that Thatcher will remain both ‘saintly’ and ‘devilish’ for a while yet. Debates over her legacy, over whose party she would today have joined, and over fitting forms of remembrance remain very much political issues. Even writing about Thatcher can be regarded as a political act, as an emerging literature on Thatcher-scholarship testifies. God and Mrs Thatcher, however, does effectively ‘locate’ Thatcher. Through her exploration of Thatcher’s relationship with institutional Christianity Filby is able to piece together a contextual framework often overlooked in academic work which tends to regard Thatcherite morality as subsidiary to its economic mission. This new perspective makes God and Mrs Thatcher a valuable contribution to the history of Anglicanism and to the cultural history of late 20th-century Britain more broadly. It also provides an original, thoroughly researched and highly readable addition to studies of Thatcher and Thatcherism.
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