

PROLOGUE

GOD AND MRS THATCHER

‘All the great political questions of our day are primarily theological.’

– ARCHBISHOP WILLIAM TEMPLE, 1942¹

THE OBITUARIES HAD long been composed; the commemorative pull outs were ready to be printed. Much ink would be spilled over Lady Thatcher’s passing as commentators and journalists filed in earnest to have their say on the first draft of history. Tweets rather than pin-badges were now the chief form of popular protest but it was a more fleeting and disposable kind. Summations of her reign in 140 characters clogged up the Twitter feed, both the sweet chirps of birds and the raspy hiss of vultures. Reporters were dispatched across the kingdom – to Tyneside, Toxteth, Basildon, the Clyde and, of course, to her childhood home of Grantham – all in a desperate bid to gauge that ill-definable thing: the national mood. ‘Thatcher gave me my first home’, ‘Thatcher took away my livelihood’, came

the cries, but anyone born after she had left office in 1990 looked on in bemusement. ‘Wasn’t she an old lady who had lost her memory?’ was the response from one seventeen-year-old.

For a brief moment, Britain appeared to have rewound itself back to the 1980s. In Trafalgar Square, anti-Thatcher protestors geared up for a re-run of the poll-tax riots, although on this occasion the officers on horseback were not necessary. The left tried in vain to resuscitate the lost passion and solidarity of yesteryear, all together now for one last chorus of ‘Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, out, out, out’. It was as if they were at a reunion gig of a group they had loved in their youth; they could remember the lyrics but somehow the anthem was not as resonant or powerful as it had once been. Meanwhile former ministers rehearsed well-worn anecdotes of Thatcher hand-bagging foreign dignitaries or of her rustling up shepherd’s pie in the No. 10 kitchen; all revelling in that kinky mix of the regal and domestic that so defined the Iron Lady. Her admirers immediately began the process of canonisation heralding the miracle worker St Margaret, while her detractors were determined to cast her as the Antichrist, the Iron Lady who had had the nation in the jaws of a vice and mercilessly tightened until it could stand no more. How could the media sustain this for nine days until her funeral? How did it ever sustain it for the eleven years she was in power? It was, however, a purely domestic preoccupation. American broadcasters soon lost interest, while one Spanish television channel simply re-hashed material it had used for *The Iron Lady* film starring Meryl Streep.

Lady Thatcher’s funeral in the City was an extraordinary day. The crowd was a mixture of tourists out to see the London they had been promised in the guidebooks, day-trippers from Middle England there to ‘pay their respects’ and City folk hanging out of their office windows avoiding work. All waited until the ceremony was over, not in mourning as such, rather as respectful observers. The British spectator stood patiently and seemingly in harmony with British pomp and ceremony, occupying the narrow City streets not designed for such spectacles.

I spent the day in the media tent opposite St Paul's Cathedral telling any broadcaster that would give me airtime that Lady Thatcher was a devout Christian, that she had been a preacher before she had entered politics and that the funeral service reflected her Methodist roots. 'So for our listeners at home, who may not know, could you tell us what exactly a Methodist is?' enquired one interviewer, who I noticed was sporting a pair of 'Gotcha!' engraved cufflinks.* I had an inkling that Margaret Thatcher would have been appalled, both by his question and by his choice of accessory.

Even from the grave, it seems, Margaret Thatcher was determined to tell the Church of England what true Christianity was: a heavy dose of 'hell and damnation' from the King James Bible and a rousing rendition of 'I Vow to Thee, My Country'. The Bishop of London's sermon certainly went down better than his words had done thirty years previously. Back in 1982 he had scripted the Archbishop of Canterbury's notorious 'pacifist' sermon delivered at the Falklands War thanksgiving service in St Paul's. On that occasion, Thatcher was reportedly 'livid', but on this day, one would imagine, she would have had no such quibbles.

It was not a send-off like Winston Churchill's: there were no steel cranes bowing in unison along the Thames. Perhaps the equivalent would have been if that towering shrine to Thatcherism, Canary Wharf, had ceremoniously switched its lights on and off. But Thatcher wanted no such show, no lying-in-state either. In the end, she had judged it about right, seemingly rekindling her populist antennae in death, which some would say she had lost at the end of her political life. Nonetheless, few could ignore the incongruity of a woman lauded as Britain's greatest peacetime Prime Minister being given a funeral with full military honours. This was not the burying of an international stateswoman

* 'Gotcha!' was the headline used by *The Sun* newspaper during the Falklands War when British forces had successfully sunk the Argentinian ship, the *Belgrano*. The headline was withdrawn by 8 p.m. that evening, but not before 1.5 million copies had been printed and dispatched.

(as evident by the congregation turnout at St Paul's), rather it was a fitting send-off for the lower-middle-class girl from Grantham who had spent her life rattling the British establishment, but who in death had the Queen, the Church, the BBC, the military, even former enemies in her party, finally celebrating her as one of them.

If George Orwell described England as 'a family with the wrong members in control', then Margaret Thatcher was the cruel but indomitable aunt whose favoured nieces sang her praises while those black sheep whom she had disregarded waded in with tales of woe. In death as in life, Thatcher's presence cast a piercing spotlight on Britain, but instead of revealing it to be either in discord or harmony, her passing simply demonstrated how much it had changed. As a sombre and respectful silence greeted the gun carriage and the pallbearers carried the coffin up the steps into St Paul's, that woman's shadow, which had loomed so large for so long, gently faded as the sun burst out over Paternoster Square. The mood was not morbid nor was it celebratory, but rather one of relief. Thatcherism had finally been laid to rest. As the renowned historian Peter Hennessy reflected: 'The 1980s is no longer politics, but history.'



I DOUBT MANY people have uttered the words 'God' and 'Mrs Thatcher' in the same sentence. To some it may border on blasphemy, even heresy; to the less religiously or politically sensitive, the idea that religion played any significant part in the 1980s is not immediately obvious in a decade dominated by union conflict, deindustrialisation, market liberalisation and the Cold War. Scour any books on the decade and you will find little reference to religion, the Church of England, and next to nothing on Margaret Thatcher's personal faith. To a large degree this absence is indicative of a broader problem: the secular mindset of most historians of contemporary Britain, which has meant

that religion is largely omitted from writings on the twentieth century (although, for obvious reasons, historians and commentators have been forced to confront the issue in the twenty-first). Crudely speaking, those analysing Britain's experience hang their work on two central narratives. Firstly, Britain's withdrawal from empire and its decline as a global economic superpower and, secondly, its transition to a mass democracy and the development of its welfare state. Yet few ponder on that other major change, which was no less dramatic and would have as great an impact on Britain's political culture, namely the collapse of Christianity. Historians of the nineteenth century, of course, find it impossible to ignore religion. Victorian politics, to a degree, was dominated by the tussle between Nonconformists, Catholics and the Church of England, as Britain's religious minorities and non-believers, no longer silenced by persecution, fought the long, hard battle for equal recognition before the law. Christians of varying shades spearheaded the great causes of the century from the anti-slavery movement and temperance to social and electoral reform. Parties and votes were sliced along denominational lines, with the Conservative Party firmly positioned as the protector of the Church of England and the Liberal Party forwarding the interests of the Nonconformists. These bonds were not so fixed as to prevent a High Anglican (William Gladstone) from becoming leader of the Liberals, nor an Anglican of Jewish origin (Benjamin Disraeli) to take charge of the Conservatives, but the lengths to which both went to reassure their separate Christian constituencies reflected the enduring strength of these allegiances.

It is commonly assumed that Christianity ceased to have a pivotal role in British politics from the Edwardian period onwards. Disillusionment replaced faith as Britons dropped the cross somewhere amidst the muddy mass slaughter of the Somme, and so it followed that with declining observance came the de-Christianisation and the eventual secularisation of British politics. Nonconformist grievances became faint cries, the pulpit was no longer the training ground for would-be

MPs and the ties between parties and denominations, which had defined the previous century, withered away as class replaced religion as the central dividing line in the mass democratic age.

And yet Christianity in twentieth-century Britain was remarkable not for its sudden death but for its lingering influence on both the left and the right. The formation of the Labour Party owed much to its Christian impetus. It was this spiritual inspiration, which distinguished British socialism from its more secular and radical manifestations on the European continent, that was one of the many reasons why the party was able to quickly evolve into a centrist force. A survey of the first intake of Labour MPs, that was conducted in 1906, revealed that only two out of the forty-five had actually read Karl Marx, with many more citing the Bible as their chief influence.² The sacraments could still arouse as much passion as protectionism in Parliament, as the Church of England's failure to secure the revision of the Prayer Book in 1927–8 demonstrated. Led by Conservative evangelical laymen, Home Secretary Sir William Joynson-Hicks and the Attorney General, Sir Thomas Inskip, MPs twice rejected the proposed new version out of fears that the Church had gone too far in accommodating Romanist practices. The cause of Protestant England had been defended and protected by parliamentarians although the debacle was to have important consequences for Church–state relations. A red-faced Church was determined that no such intervention would ever happen again and thus set itself on the path towards greater autonomy from Parliament.

All three parties – Liberal, Conservative and Labour – could claim a Christian ethos and continued to feed off their spiritual heritage. The post-war settlement, which massively expanded the responsibilities of the state in the areas of education, health, welfare and housing, was not simply a political consensus but more profoundly a moral consensus forged out of the shared hardships of the Depression and the War and the common ground between Tory Anglicans and Christian

socialists. In many senses, the post-war settlement, which was to be baptised the 'New Jerusalem', was the pinnacle moment in Britain's Christian politics and one in which the churches, especially the Church of England, played a pivotal role. Things were, however, beginning to change. When, in 1964, Harold Wilson proclaimed that the Labour Party 'owed more to Methodism than to Marxism', it was a sentiment with which most party activists could agree, but not for much longer. Soon a more radical form of secular socialism took hold: one that embraced identity politics (that of sexuality, race and gender) but, oddly, seemed to ignore religion as a form of identification. At the same time, One-nation Conservatism began to detach itself from the Church of England and in membership and tone was no longer exclusively Protestant or even Christian.

Nonetheless, most of Britain's post-war prime ministers were men of faith even if they became wary of preaching the Gospel to an increasingly secular electorate. Harold Macmillan would always reach for his Bible in times of trouble, Harold Wilson could claim a solid Nonconformist underbelly, while Edward Heath was one-time correspondent for the *Church Times* and cited Archbishop William Temple as one of his chief influences. Labour's Jim Callaghan was born into a devout Baptist household and had been a Sunday school teacher in his youth and, even though he later became a semi-detached member, he always acknowledged the debt he owed to Christianity.³ The exception was Winston Churchill who, when asked whether he was a 'pillar of the church' replied, 'Madam, I'd rather describe myself as a flying buttress – I support the church from the outside.'⁴

Despite declining religious observance, priests did not hide behind their altars and retreat from public life; indeed political engagement was believed to be one way that the Church could connect with the ungodly masses. The Anglican bishops, still with their treasured twenty-six seats in the House of Lords, persisted in offering well-intentioned (but not always well-informed) interjections on the pressing issues of

the day. On the key matters that dominated post-war politics – the evolution of the welfare state, decolonisation of empire, legislation on sexual morality, immigration and industrial conflict – the Church of England did not simply let its views be known, but, in many instances, was crucial in shaping the outcome.

To a certain extent, all this activity has been obscured by the blanket theory of secularisation. But this sociological concept – that is, an understanding that modernisation precipitates the gradual erosion of religion in the public and private sphere – is a relatively unhelpful explanation in the case of Britain, which even today maintains a somewhat complex relationship with Christianity. Crudely speaking, whereas America has a secular state but a largely devout public, Britain has a Christianised state and a predominantly secular electorate. Statistics on churchgoing, which clergymen have morbidly obsessed over since the first religious census in 1851, have traditionally been the litmus test for the strength of belief in Britain. Yet the notion that the spiritual health of the nation should be judged on the number of those who spend a few hours in a church on one day of the week is a rather restricted method of calculation to say the least. Throughout the ages, people went to church for a myriad of reasons, including poor relief, education, compulsion and social expectation as well as out of genuine faith. Christianity has always filtered into and shaped various aspects of British life, be it philosophy, culture, politics or class.

It is, however, an undeniable fact that from the late 1960s, Britain, like most other Western countries (with the exception of the United States) experienced a dramatic decline in Christian worship and affiliation. Yet, on the eve of the Thatcher years, Britain could hardly be called ‘secular’, for in education, broadcasting, law and, of course, in ceremonial character, Britain remained identifiably Christian. Enoch Powell was surely right when he wrote in 1981: ‘The nation was once not as religious as some like to believe, nor is it now as secular as people

now like to assume.⁵ The blend between the secular and sacred may have been less obvious by the late-twentieth century and no longer a decisive factor at election time but it remained a notable undercurrent running through political thought and action. In short, Christianity still mattered, and it would matter significantly during the fractious years of the 1980s.

The broad aim of this book is to examine the interrelationship between religion and politics in post-war Britain. It is thus a two-pronged story concerning the politicisation of Christianity on the one hand and the Christianisation of politics on the other. It therefore seeks to demonstrate how the political class sought inspiration (and legitimisation) from the Gospel for their political ideas and policies and how the Established Church, to the same degree, viewed engagement in politics as part of its spiritual mission. The 1980s represent a key juncture in this narrative for two reasons. Firstly, in 1979, unbeknownst to most of the public at the time, Britain had elected its most religious prime minister since William Gladstone, one who from the very first moment of her premiership referenced her spiritual motivation by reciting a prayer on the steps of No. 10. Margaret Thatcher, though, did not simply draw on Christianity for rhetorical ornamentation for, as the daughter of a Methodist lay-preacher, she had a clear understanding of the religious basis of her political values. In fact, it was no accident that Britain elected a Nonconformist woman precisely at the time that its 'Nonconformist conscience' died; the conviction politics of the Iron Lady satisfied a thirst for certainty in an age of profound doubt. Just as the emergence of Thatcherism needs to be set within the context of Britain's economic and industrial decline, so too does it need to be analysed within the context of the country's religious decline.

Secondly, one of the most politically damaging and forceful challenges that Margaret Thatcher faced throughout her premiership was from the Church of England. While the Labour Party endured a period

of self-inflicted paralysis, it was the Established Church which, rather surprisingly and often willingly, stepped up as the 'unofficial opposition' to defend what they considered to be Britain's Christian social democratic values. In the pulpit, at the picket line, on the Lords' benches and in the inner cities, the Anglican clergy routinely condemned neo-liberal theory and practice as being fundamentally at odds with the Christian principles of fellowship, interdependence and peace. How and why the Established Church sought and gained such prominence at a time of declining faith is one of the central themes of this book.

The Conservative Party and the once-dubbed 'Tory Party at Prayer' became locked in a conflict that would have political, spiritual and, in some cases, personal consequences. For many, though, this was not a minor political spat; it reflected a serious theological gulf. Was the biblical message principally about individual faith and liberty as Margaret Thatcher enthusiastically proclaimed, or collective obligation and interdependence as the bishops preached? Of all the biblical references that littered the sermons and speeches of politicians and clergy in the 1980s, it was the parable of the Good Samaritan that was most frequently evoked. For Margaret Thatcher, the story of a Samaritan helping an unknown, battered man, who was lying helpless in the road, demonstrated the supremacy of individual charitable virtue over enforced state taxation. In her uncompromising words: 'No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well.'⁶ For the Anglican leadership, on the other hand, the parable meant something quite different, namely the universality of human fellowship and the scriptural justification for the indiscriminate redistribution of wealth. As the Bishop of Stepney made clear: 'The point of the story is not that he had some money but that the others passed by on the other side.'⁷ Behind these differing interpretations of one parable lay contrasting conceptions of Christianity, of political values and, indeed, of the nation itself.

It is, of course, possible to examine the 1980s not in terms of competing

theologies but in terms of ideologies, namely the polarisation between left and right. If the contribution of the Labour Party is downplayed slightly it is because the left had abandoned the post-war consensus (to an even greater degree than the right) and was entangled in a civil war, which had much to do with the decline of its traditional working-class support base and very little to do with Christianity. This is a book chiefly about the conflict between the Established Church and the Conservative Party, not about the various fortunes of Christian denominations in post-war Britain. But, of course, it is impossible to tell this story without reference to them and, in particular, to the rise of the ecumenical movement. Nor does this narrative deal sufficiently with that province where the convergence between religion and politics was most apparent and most damaging: Northern Ireland. This is in part because the Troubles were a sectarian conflict rather than a theological war of words on the rights and wrongs of capitalism. If anything, the toxic mix of the religious and the political in Northern Ireland revealed the tameness of the debate in Britain.

Of course Christians can be found on both sides of the political spectrum and Christianity itself has been both a progressive and a conservative force throughout history. If there is one scriptural certainty, it is that biblical interpretation is elastic and can be moulded to justify whatever one wishes to endorse, be it the 'invisible hand' of the market or the socialist utopia. In this specific case, the Church of England shifted further leftwards while the Conservative Party took a sharp turn to the right, causing an irrevocable breach between two institutions that had been close allies for over 200 years or more. Cracks in this relationship could be dated back to the early 1900s but the final break would only come in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher.

It might be said that both the Church of England and the Conservative Party have transformed more than any other British institutions in the twentieth century. Paradoxically, for two organisations supposedly concerned with tradition and preservation, both have shown a

remarkable ability to adapt in order to survive. That the Church of England was not only able to maintain, but, in many ways, strengthen its role as the Established Church in a secular pluralised society may have been by default rather than explicit design. Arguably, it has proved remarkably successful. The Conservative Party has gone through a similar process of reinvention. In the age of mass enfranchisement, the party of land and privilege gradually morphed into promoters of the free market and the upwardly mobile class, while maintaining its paternalistic tone and old establishment associations. It was not an easy transition and, like the Church, it consistently faced complaints from within its membership. But, by doing so, the Conservatives were able to become the most successful political party of the twentieth century. Collectively, what it does suggest is that all the heated debate over what is 'true' Conservatism or 'true' Anglicanism – a favourite navel-gazing pastime of both Anglicans and Conservatives – ultimately reflects a wilful misreading of their complex histories.

Margaret Thatcher, however, stands apart from this narrative. This is due to the fact that both the left and the right (for different reasons) have chosen to grant her an almost mythical-like status. Your opinion of Margaret Thatcher is immediately given away by how you refer to her; some literally spit out her surname with an emphasis on the first syllable, others prefer the overly familiar 'Maggie'. Even after her death, the political class and the public still struggle to speak of the former Prime Minister as a part of history, consumed as they are in a seemingly exhaustive debate over whether her time in power offers the cause or the remedy for today's problems. This hints at one of the main motivations of this book: a wish to consign Margaret Thatcher to the past and locate her place within it rather than see her as an ahistorical phenomenon of either saintly or devilish proportions.

By and large, the British prefer their prime ministers to be pedestrian rather than charismatic characters. One need only compare the palatial grandeur of the White House to the poky flat above No. 10

to illustrate this point. The post of prime minister, curtailed as it is by a parliamentary chamber and constitutional monarch, facilitates the British dislike and distrust of strong leadership. Yet Margaret Thatcher is one of the few occupiers of No. 10 to have subverted this tradition.

The legend of the Iron Lady is well known and remains remarkably intact. Margaret Thatcher, it appears, was gifted with superhuman capabilities. She was a woman from humble origins whose great mental and physical resilience made her the 'best man for the job'. She emerged unscathed without a hair out of place from the ashes of the bombed-out Grand Hotel in Brighton and successfully crushed the enemies within as well as threats beyond our shores. She was Bou-dicca, beating the bureaucrats in Brussels; she was Elizabeth I, always flirtatious but firm with her ministers; and in the end she was sacrificial St Joan, burnt at the stake having been betrayed by her own party. Margaret Thatcher has now been accorded a place at the dinner table with these high priestesses of history. She bulldozed her way through the New Jerusalem, unleashed Britons from the chains of socialism and set the people free.

Recent biographers and historians have quite rightly put a dent in this mythology as Richard Vinen, John Campbell and others have reminded us that Thatcher was in fact an incredibly pragmatic and canny politician and that the 'ism' she spawned was not as coherent an ideology as she herself liked to proclaim nor as the left liked to presume. Charles Moore's highly illuminating and balanced official biography offers a detailed portrait of her character and time in Downing Street that is never likely to be surpassed. *God and Mrs Thatcher* is not strictly a biography, rather Margaret Thatcher's life and times are used as narrative hinges to explain the fundamental shifts that took place in Britain's political and religious values in the second half of the twentieth century, and the ensuing debate in the 1980s (chiefly between the Established Church and the Tory Party) about those values. In

short, the aim is not only to show how Margaret Thatcher recreated Britain, but also to address a much more intriguing question: how did Britain create Margaret Thatcher?

Margaret Thatcher was very much a product of provincial inter-war England. But, crucially, she escaped and then benefited from the opportunities that were opening up to women. In one sense, her story is a classic tale of mid-twentieth-century social embourgeoisement: a grammar school girl 'done good', although marrying a millionaire certainly eased the journey. She was not a throwback to Britain's Victorian past, but most definitely a twentieth-century woman: one who witnessed Britain's imperial decline and accepted the new American empire, indeed more readily than some of her contemporaries.

The two defining moments that shaped the politicians of her generation – the Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War – she experienced from a distance. What Margaret Thatcher did experience (albeit via her father) was the collapse of Nonconformity and the decline of the Liberal Party as its central mouthpiece. She was a product of Britain's changing religio-political landscape and it is this, possibly more than any other factor, which explains why a lower-middle-class girl of Nonconformist origins was able to become the leader of the male-dominated party of the establishment.

Margaret Thatcher would often indulge in the fact that she was an outsider in her party, and it is true she was. Although she respected and often displayed an embarrassing reverence for the old establishment, it was always an admiration she felt from a distance. She married into it, she worked for it, adopted its habits, tastes and values more than she cared to admit, but throughout her life she always understood that she was never truly a member of the club. Much like Methodist founder John Wesley's semi-attachment to the Church of England, Margaret Thatcher always had one foot in and one foot out of the British establishment. On the surface, it was her gender that marked her out, but in fact it was her Nonconformist class-consciousness, formed at a time

when such distinctions still held sway, which was the source of her anti-establishmentarianism.

The religious faith of leaders is not to be underestimated. It can drive some to war, others to peace; some left, others right. One's faith and religious heritage is not something that is confined to the head or the heart, it manifests in different ways: in personality, outlook, style and language. When speaking of Margaret Thatcher's Non-conformity, one cannot simply consider personal faith, but also her class and principles. If Thatcher was a conviction politician, then at the root of her politics were her religio-political values. These were assumed and accepted precepts about God and man applied to the political sphere. This is not a book about policies, but ideas. It is less about what Margaret Thatcher and her contemporaries did, more about what they believed.