

GOD IN GOVERNMENT: THE IMPACT OF FAITH ON BRITISH POLITICS AND PRIME MINISTERS, 1997-2012

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INTRODUCTION

Alistair Campbell famously said, ‘we don’t do God’, but this does not seem to have been borne out by developments in British politics since Labour swept to power in 1997. Faith has played a more prominent and open role in British politics in the past 16 years than it has done at any time since the time of William Gladstone in the late nineteenth century and arguably ever. The premierships of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron have seen faith issues, groups and causes rise up the political agenda.

The reasons for this are the residual attachment to religion in the UK population and some increasingly assertive minority faith groups, particularly the Muslim community following the ‘Rushdie Affair’ in 1989. This has been coupled with increased interest in and anxiety caused by faith groups amongst the ‘Westminster village’ and the country at large since the events of 9/11 and 7/7. Faith communities are now seen as an important constituency to cultivate and can provide key support on issues like international development and climate change.

This is against a backdrop of an overall decline in the strength of organised religion and religious practice, such as churchgoing and attendance at places of worship, in the UK since the Second World War. The latest census results many have showed 59 per cent of British people identifying with Christianity (and another 8 per cent belonging to the five biggest minority religions – Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism), yet the UK remains, at best, lukewarm about faith; the empirical evidence shows us to be one of the most secular countries in the world, certainly compared to the United States and even several countries in continental Europe.

The Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey could be viewed as the architectural symbols of the relationship between faith and politics. Their geographical proximity reflects a complicated, sometimes close, sometimes fractious relationship. There are different ways of approaching this fascinating subject, but in this essay, we will look at the role faith has played in British politics since 1997, under the premierships of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown

and David Cameron, but first, it is helpful to consider briefly some PMs from the past.

PRE-1997: GLADSTONE ET AL

Until 1997, faith did not seem to have an overt role in British politics. To find a leader strongly influenced by their faith we have to go back to the rule of William Gladstone (1809-1898), who was PM four times, the longest spell being his first in office from 1868 to 1874. Gladstone was a religious and pious man, who had dallied with becoming a clergyman at an early age. Aged 21 he wrote a very long letter of 4,000 words to his father declaring his desire for the ‘ministerial office’ of the Church variety). Later, he said: ‘I have been long ago pledged to the service of the Church’¹.

However, even though he opted for politics, his religion informed his outlook (brilliantly documented in Richard Shannon’s book ‘Gladstone: God and Politics’). In 1831, he published his first book, ‘The State in its Relations with the Church’, arguing that since that Church possessed a monopoly of religious truth, Nonconformists and Roman Catholics ought to be excluded from all government jobs. This displeased his patron, Sir Robert Peel and he refocused his protégé’s energies, making him President of the Board of Trade in 1843.

At around the time, Gladstone started the practice of trying to ‘rescue’ and rehabilitate London prostitutes, a practice he continued even after becoming PM. Gladstone regarded his public service as a divine mission – for example writing after his election victory in 1868: ‘The Almighty seems to sustain and spare me for some purpose of His own, deeply unworthy as I know myself to be. Glory be to His name.’ Not everyone was impressed by Gladstone’s faith, regarding his attitude as sanctimonious at times, with one contemporary rival commenting: ‘I don’t mind it when he has the ace of clubs up his sleeve; but I wish he wouldn’t pretend that the Almighty put it there.’

After Gladstone, most successive PMs were not especially overtly religious. There were notable exceptions in Conservative PMs Lord Salisbury, three times Premier in the late nineteenth century over a period of 13 years and a practicing Anglican, and Stanley Baldwin, also a believer who served three times as Premier between the Wars. Before he became PM, Salisbury voiced his opposition to the Public Worship Regulation Bill, which banned certain Catholic practices within the Church (the legislation was passed in 1874). Yet it could be argued that even these two dominant political characters of their eras were not defined by their faith.

For much of the twentieth century, most PMs and senior politicians were either sceptic of faith or kept their personal faith separate from their politics. By way of example, Arthur Balfour (1848-1930), PM from 1902-1905, was once talking to the journalist Frank Harris who said ‘All the faults of the age come from Christianity and journalism’; Balfour then responded, ‘Christianity, of course, but why journalism?’ Our War-time Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, wrote in his book ‘My Early Life’ about his ‘anti-religious’ stage, but some commentators believe that later in life he became more sympathetic to religion, even praying in times of need. Even so, Churchill was not conventionally religious.

Later on, another Conservative PM, Harold Macmillan (from 1957 to 1963), was a strong Christian but again did not bring his Christian faith into public office. Macmillan, however, did recognise the potency of religious groups, once remarking: ‘There were three bodies no sensible man directly challenged: the Roman Catholic Church, the Brigade of Guards and the National Union of Mineworkers.’

The Labour Party may have been influenced by Christian thinkers in its formative years, notably Keir Hardie (1856-1915), a key figure in the formation of the party who was a Methodist lay preacher (hence the catchphrase that the ‘Labour party owes more to Methodism than Marx’). George Lansbury, who led the Labour party from 1932 to 1935, had strong Christian beliefs. Another significant intellectual figure was R H Tawney, whose seminal book

‘Religion and the Rise of Capitalism’, published in 1926 continued the influence of religious ideas on the party.

Despite these figures, Labour party leaders until Blair were not generally avowedly religious. Typical was Clement Attlee, PM from 1945 to 1951, an atheist who believed in ‘the ethics of Christianity’ but not ‘the mumbo-jumbo’; Ramsay MacDonald, the first ever Labour PM, was not a believer and Jim Callaghan, PM from 1976 to 1979, lost his faith. The most electorally successful Labour PM before Blair was Harold Wilson. He was born to nonconformist parents and attributed his socialism to his Christian tradition. In the words of his wife, Mary, ‘religion was part of his tradition’, yet it was not core to his political identity in the way that it had been to Gladstone and would prove to Blair.

MARGARET THATCHER

Margaret Thatcher, PM from 1979 to 1990, had a clear vision for the country, and whilst this was influenced by her Methodist upbringing, she did not often refer publicly to her religion. Two exceptions to this were the ‘St Lawrence Jewry’ speech in 1978 and the ‘Sermon on the Mound’, an address to the Church of Scotland in May 1988. In the first speech, given when she was still Leader of the Opposition, she shed light on her upbringing in Grantham, under the guidance of her father, Alfred Roberts, a Methodist lay preacher: ‘We often went to church twice on a Sunday, as well as on other occasions during the week. We were taught there always to make up our own minds and never take the easy way of following the crowd.’ She then explained how this influenced her outlook: ‘I never thought that Christianity equipped me with a political philosophy, but I thought it did equip me with standards to which political actions must, in the end, be referred.’

Ten years later, and now battle-hardened as PM, her ‘Sermon on the Mound’ mapped out her political philosophy. In the speech to the Church of Scotland, she cited some Christian teachings as supporting evidence for her creed, for example, asserting: ‘We are told we must work and use our talents to create wealth. ‘If a man

will not work he shall not eat' wrote St. Paul to the Thessalonians. Indeed, abundance rather than poverty has a legitimacy which derives from the very nature of Creation.' She argued, in effect, that her Christian outlook framed her ideology, which became known as 'Thatcherism.'

The creed of Thatcherism ran counter to the prevailing thinking of the Church of England in the 1980s, and there were some high-profile clashes, notably over the Falklands War and the 'Faith in the City' report in 1985. In the latter case, the Church criticised the government's economic policies in a landmark publication. One Cabinet Minister labelled the report as a 'Marxist document'. The bust-up revealed that the Church of England could no longer be considered 'the Tory party at prayer.' Whenever the Archbishop of the time, Robert Runcie, wished to appoint a bishop, her first comment was to ask why they couldn't have 'a real Christian' in the Church of England for a change! In her period in office, she forged a close alliance with the then-Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, finding common ground with his philosophy on the importance of individual and community responsibility.

When her free-market philosophy conflicted with religious tradition, the former won through. The strongest example of this was on the Sunday Trading bill in 1986, when the government attempted to allow Sunday shopping. The legislation was defeated, led by a number of traditionally-minded Conservative MPs. While Thatcher was interested in faith (reportedly reading the Old Testament from cover to cover in 1988 and quizzing her staff), religion was not centre-stage in her Premiership, partly because of her approach but also because of the social context in the UK, which regarded faith as background music and not a significant player in the public square.

TONY BLAIR

The premiership of Tony Blair coincided with an increase in the prominence of faith communities in Westminster and Whitehall. This was partly driven by exogenous events such as 9/11 and 7/7, but also Blair's personal faith. At university, Blair was influenced by the Australian priest, Peter Thompson, and was exposed to the writing of the Christian Socialist, John Macmurray (1891-1976). After becoming party leader in 1994, Blair rarely spoke about his religion. This was partly because of the reaction to a piece he did in the Sunday Telegraph over Easter 1996. The introduction to the article read: 'Why I am a Christian – Tony Blair, the Labour leader, explains how the Easter story helped form his religious convictions and reveals what the Bible taught him about politics – that he could never be a Conservative'².

Blair's team learnt lessons from this. His Press Secretary Alistair Campbell wrote in his diary entry: 'The Sunday Telegraph was splashing on the row engendered by TB's piece on God. I felt fully vindicated. As I said to TB, never talk about God...I sensed a mini-disaster, as it was Easter, and they were trying to spin this as Blair allying Labour to G-d' (6 April 1996). Two days later, Campbell recorded 'GB called and we agreed God was a disaster area'³. From that point, Blair seldom spoke about his personal faith, complying with Campbell's dictum that 'we don't do God'⁴.

Under Blair, the structures of interaction between faith communities and the government were built. A faith working group emerged from the Jubilee 2000 Millennium celebrations, later becoming the Faith Consultative Council, whilst a government Minister was appointed for faith communities (initially in the Home Office). There were regular meetings between faith leaders and Blair. This was not the first time clerics had visited Number 10 but under Blair, the encounters became more systematic and regular. There were also return visits to Churches, mosques, synagogues and Temples.

Blair was the first PM to send regular messages to faith communities on their festivals, whether on Christmas and Easter or Diwali for Hindus and Sikhs, Ramadan for Muslims and Jewish

New Year. Blair's rhetoric was often influenced by religious references⁵. Indeed, faith provided the underlying fuel and inspiration for arguably his most powerful speeches, such as the one to the Labour conference in 1995 when he quoted the Bible - 'I am my brother's keeper' – and the powerful one in Brighton in 2001 in the wake of 9/11. Blair also used faith to his advantage in talks over Northern Ireland: by all accounts, he persuaded the unionist leader Ian Paisley to accept the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 by saying that he, like Paisley, communicated with the Almighty, and that he was sure the Almighty wanted the agreement.

Blair's premiership came to be dominated by the invasion of Iraq War in 2003. He also had to respond to the London terrorist bombings in July 2005, and address the problem of extremism in the Muslim community. Overall it would be hard to argue that he was promoting an all-encompassing faith agenda: in an interview he once poured scorn on the idea, saying 'I can't go into the corner and ask God what the minimum wage should be'⁶.

One of his religious mentors, Father John Caden confirmed this: 'He always said....that he didn't have a right to legislate against someone else's conscience....He believed that politicians should never use their own ethical views to obstruct action or change'⁷. Interestingly for a man who converted to Roman Catholicism post-Premiership, he voted against the traditional Catholic position in parliamentary votes on abortion, same-sex unions and stem cell research.

However, on certain issues, Blair was sympathetic to the wishes of faith communities. For instance, Blair's government gave to support to faith schools seeing them as capable of raising standards in poorer areas. Nonetheless the government ran into trouble in 2006 with a proposal to mandate faith schools to allocate 25 per cent of their intake from outside their own community, and had to back down under pressure from religious groups, especially the Catholic Church. A second area where Blair saw the faith communities as allies was international development, which reached its culmination point with the Make Poverty History movement in 2005, when an estimated 225,000 protesters gathered in Edinburgh, mainly from

the churches. Third, Blair's government reacted strongly against instances of racism and religious prejudice, passing legislation against incitement to religious hatred and also establishing Holocaust Memorial Day in January 2000, as a way of heeding the lessons of intolerance and bigotry.

On some issues under Blair, the mainstream faith communities found themselves at odds with the government. The Civil Partnerships Act, granting civil rights to same-sex couples akin to a civil marriage, was introduced in 2004, with religious groups expressing concern. A high-profile dispute occurred in 2006-07, when the Catholic Church objected to legislation, which would force their agencies to permit gay couples to adopt. The then leader, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor fumed 'we believe it would be unreasonable, unnecessary and unjust discrimination against Catholics.' Blair was reportedly sympathetic but couldn't hold his Cabinet on this, and in the end the government ruled that there should be no opt-out for Catholic adoption agencies when it came to anti-discrimination laws, but gave them a grace period of 21 months to prepare for implementing the legislation. Another area where the government had to heed the views of religious groups was on building supercasinos. When the idea was mooted, there was a strong backlash with religious groups expressing worry that it would increase gambling. In Blair memoirs, he recalls that 'it ran into the ground because of resistance from the Church and the press'⁸.

Whilst there was a mixed impact of faith-friendly policies under the Blair government, faith communities became an important constituency in the political process. When he stood down as PM in 2007, Archbishop Rowan Williams' tribute reflected this: 'Tony Blair has understood as well as any Prime Minister in recent times why religion matters, how faith communities contribute to the common good and why religious extremism should have no place in a progressive society' (statement, 10 May 2007). Blair was our most theologically-interested PM since Gladstone. In Anthony Seldon's biography, he argues that of all Blair's relationships, the one with God was the most important. It was not a surprise that one of his

projects on leaving office was to set up a Faith Foundation to promote inter-faith understanding. Indeed in his memoirs, 'A Journey', he admits: 'I have always been more interested in religion than politics'⁹.

GORDON BROWN

In contrast to Blair, Gordon Brown was not so theologically interested and less personally religiously observant. As George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, remarked about the difference: 'Blair's interest in faith was more theological and intuitive. Gordon Brown is cerebral and practical. He is an idealist based on socialist principles which are largely Christian-Jewish'¹⁰. Once the faith genie was out the bottle, Gordon Brown, a 'Son of the Manse', saw the potential for faith groups to act as agents of social change and particularly to support his international development work.

With parallels to Margaret Thatcher (even though they ended up in different political places), Brown's upbringing was heavily influenced by his father's role as a Church of Scotland minister and imbued with the values of hard work, caring for others and devotion to public service. Indeed, he claims that these formative lessons led him into politics, in his 1997 conference speech asserting: 'I don't recall all the sermons my father preached Sunday after Sunday. But I will never forget these words he left me with: 'We must be givers as well as getters.' Put something back. And by doing so make a difference. And this is my moral compass.'

It is no surprise that Gordon Brown had a passion for alleviating poverty, both domestically and internationally. As Chancellor from 1997, he held regular meetings with faith leaders and representatives of NGOs to discuss world trade and development. This led to the Jubilee 2000 movement which lobbied the G7 to write off debt from 41 of the world's poorest countries. As Will Hutton commented in the Observer: 'The left-of-centre should take note: it's no longer Morris, Keynes and Beveridge who inspire and change the world – it's Leviticus'¹¹. The Brown government also lent

its support to inter-faith relations – the topic was raised at his first Prime Minister’s Questions in July 2007 – and introduced the first Inter-Faith Week in 2009. Brown’s finest hour as PM came in response to the financial crisis and the recapitalisation of the banking system in 2008. As well as his mastery of the technical economic detail, Brown gave a number of speeches at this time calling for markets to have morals – and spoke at a large-scale event at St Paul’s Cathedral in April 2009 just before the G20 in London.

Despite this goodwill, faith groups often expressed disgruntlement that the government didn’t ‘get it.’ This view was expressed by the most senior cleric in the land, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in December 2009, who criticised the government for looking at religious faith as a problem rather than valuing its contribution: ‘The trouble with a lot of government initiatives about faith is that they assume it is a problem, it’s an eccentricity, [and that] it’s practised by oddities, foreigners and minorities’¹².

Under Brown, there were some high-profile disagreements with the Church and religious groups. For instance, the Catholic Church and others objected to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill in 2008. In the end, the cross-party attempt to ban hybrid human animal embryos was defeated in the Commons on a free vote.

DAVID CAMERON

David Cameron, who became PM in May 2010, is also less committed in his personal faith than Tony Blair was. However, like Gordon Brown, he sees faith groups as potential allies in a cause he is passionate about, in his case ‘the Big Society’. Cameron has remarked that his own Anglicanism is like ‘Magic FM in the Chilterns’, something that fades in and out. His most detailed address on the role of religion in politics, thus far, has taken place in a speech in Oxford in December 2011 to mark the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. He reminded the audience that: ‘We are a Christian country and we should not be afraid to say so...the Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals which make Britain what it is today.’ Two years on, in August 2013,

he elaborated on the nature of his personal faith: 'I'm a Christian and I'm an active member of the Church of England, and like all Christians I think I sometimes struggle with some of the sayings and some of the instructions' ¹³.

Above all, Cameron admires and encourages the role played by faith groups in civil society, with their high rates of voluntary work and charitable giving. When Pope Benedict visited Britain in September 2010, Cameron said: 'It's at the heart of the new culture of social responsibility we want to build in Britain. People of faith – including our 30,000 faith-based charities – are great architects of that new culture. For many, faith is a spur to action. It shapes their beliefs and behaviour; and it gives them a sense of purpose'¹⁴. Despite being seen as crucial sources of social capital by David Cameron's government, faith groups have not been completely uncritical of the 'Big Society.' Former Archbishop Rowan Williams said that he gave it 'two and a half cheers' explaining the half 'because we don't quite yet know how far this might be a buck-passing exercise'¹⁵.

Williams' concerns with the government's austerity programme reached their apotheosis in June 2011, when he wrote a critical piece for the *New Statesman*. Cameron's response was sharp: 'I've never been one to say that the Church has to fight shy of making political interventions, but what I would say is that I profoundly disagree with many of the views that he's expressed, particularly on issues like debt and on welfare and education'¹⁶. This row followed another one which had taken place six months previously over Cabinet Minister Iain Duncan Smith's welfare reforms. Duncan Smith did not take kindly to being lectured by the Church, reminding readers of the *Daily Mail* that 'Joseph was not an absent father, he was there. History's greatest male role model and a humbling lesson for feckless fathers today'¹⁷.

Cameron's contemporary political leaders are lukewarm about faith, and probably less comfortable about it than the PM. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, an atheist married to a Catholic, is not hostile to faith and was supportive of the Pope's visit in 2010, when asked about it during the general election campaign. Labour leader Ed

Miliband, whilst from Jewish roots, has a similarly secular outlook to Clegg. Miliband opened his debut conference address as leader in 2010 talking about his family history, with both of his parents escaping the perils of the Holocaust and finding their way to Britain. Periodically he has referred to his Jewishness, writing in a *New Statesman* article in May 2012: 'I am not religious. But I am Jewish. My relationship with my Jewishness is complex'¹⁸. The 'Blue Labour' movement, under the intellectual direction of Lord Maurice Glasman, professes support for 'faith, flag and family', though it is too early to assess its influence on Ed Miliband. However, at this stage, there is no clearly discernible links between the Labour leader's ethnic Jewish roots and his emerging political programme.

OVERALL

In the years since Tony Blair was PM, faith has become an integral part of the national conversation. Even though he was the most devout in practice of the three PMs since 1997, faith has also affected the work and landscape of his two successors, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. Politicians often derive their 'inner core' and belief system from their personal faith. The degree to which they should talk about their faith, and make overt links with their politics, is a moot point. Despite the UK census results showing a residual attachment to Christianity and burgeoning faith identity amongst some minority groups, much of the British public is still uncomfortable with politicians emphasising their faith.

Faith groups are important constituencies and a number of faith leaders have extensive contact with Westminster and Whitehall. While there are fewer believers in religion and fewer churchgoers since the immediate post-war period, faith is a crucial part of many people's identities. At the same time as these changes in the 'faith fabric' of British society, there has been a sharp fall in the membership of political parties, reflecting a wider attenuation of people's collective attachments.

Whoever the PM is nowadays, faith is a part of the public affairs landscape. The views of faith groups are fed in to many policy issues from health and education to international development and community relations. Faith is now woven into the fabric of the British polity. This, on balance, is a welcome development since they have both wisdom and practical experience to contribute. Faith groups can continue to ‘speak truth to power’ but in lobbying for a policy or on a political issue, must be able to take ‘no’ for an answer.

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NOTES

¹ Richard Shannon, 'Gladstone: God and Politics', p.43

² Telegraph, 7 April 1996

³ From Alastair Campbell, 'The Blair Years: Extracts from the Alastair Campbell Diaries'

⁴ Said in 2003 in response to Blair's idea to end a broadcast to the nation 'God bless You', reported in an interview with the Vanity Fair journalist David Margolick

⁵ Research on his party conference speeches between 1997 and 2007 showed that he used 84 religious references, an average of 9.3 – Theos research published on 14th September 2008

⁶ Spiegel interview, 6 September 2010

⁷ John Burton, 'We don't do God', p.208-09

⁸ Tony Blair, A Journey: My Political Life, p.635

⁹ Tony Blair, A Journey: My Political Life, p.690

¹⁰ The Times 13 Oct 2007

¹¹ Observer, 3rd October 1999

¹² Telegraph, 12th December 2009

¹³ Telegraph, 8th June 2013

¹⁴ David Cameron speech, 19th September 2010

¹⁵ Telegraph, 24th July 2010

¹⁶ David Cameron quoted on BBC Online, 9th June 2011

¹⁷ Mail, 22nd December 2010

¹⁸ New Statesman, 23rd May 2012