

# The Religious Mind of Mrs Thatcher

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Addressing a significant historical and biographical gap in accounts of the life of Margaret Thatcher, this paper focuses on the formation of Mrs Thatcher's religious beliefs, their application during her premiership, and the reception of these beliefs. Using the previously unseen sermon notes of her father, Alfred Roberts, as well as the text of three religious sermons Thatcher delivered during her political career and numerous interviews she gave speaking on her faith, this paper suggests that the popular view of Roberts' religious beliefs have been wide of the mark, and that Thatcher was a deeply religious politician who took many of her moral and religious beliefs from her upbringing. In the conclusion, further areas for research linking Thatcher's faith and its political implications are suggested.*

*Throughout this paper, hyperlinks are made to the Thatcher Foundation website ([www.margaretthatcher.org](http://www.margaretthatcher.org)) where the sermons, speeches, and interviews that Margaret Thatcher gave on her religious beliefs can be found.*

## INTRODUCTION

*'The fundamental reason of being put on earth is so to improve your character that you are fit for the next world.'*<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Thatcher on *Today*

BBC Radio 4

6 June 1987

Every British Prime Minister since the sixties has claimed belief in God. This paper will focus on just one – Margaret Thatcher. In essence, five substantive points are argued here which should markedly alter perceptions of Thatcher in both a biographical and a political sense. Firstly, that Thatcher was a deeply religious politician who took many of her moral and religious beliefs from her upbringing. Secondly, that the orthodox interpretation of Alfred Roberts' (Thatcher's father) religiosity as being of a 'fundamentalist' and 'Bible-based' nature is seriously flawed.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, that despite claims to the contrary, Thatcher had a genuine belief in social justice, derived from her religious convictions. Fourthly, that Thatcher's premiership endured the worst Church-State relations of the twentieth century. Fifthly, and perhaps most importantly, that religion has long been neglected in British politics and much research is needed to reappraise its role in the twentieth century.

Against all of these points, the underlying argument is made that religion still matters

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<sup>1</sup> *Margaret Thatcher: Complete Public Statements 1945-1990 CD-ROM* (henceforth *CD-ROM*) or

<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106646>

<sup>2</sup> John Campbell, *The Grocer's Daughter Vol 1*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 16.

in British politics. Whilst there may not be a ‘moral majority’ as in the United States, and thus no significant religious lobby in British politics, historians have been far too willing to accept that secularisation – be it in the form of declining religious attendance, declining belief and practice, or the growing scepticism and hostility to religion – has taken hold of Britain to the extent that religion is no longer of any causal importance in either politics or society.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, this paper aims to prove that the religious beliefs of Margaret Thatcher matters not only in a biographical sense, but also in a social, political, and historical one.

### **The death of Christian Britain?**

Of all British Prime Ministers from Harold Macmillan to Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher was by far the most vocal about her faith whilst in office, and the only one to draw direct and explicit parallels between her personal beliefs and her political ones. Macmillan believed that ‘a nation can[not] live without religion’, and, more personally in his official biography, he claimed that ‘I go to Communion as long as I can...I reach for the Bible whenever I can...I still find religion a great help’.<sup>4</sup> For Douglas-Home, ‘Christianity was of the heart, not of the pew, a matter of private witness and personal conduct’.<sup>5</sup> Wilson was brought up very much in the Nonconformist manner as a Baptist, joined the evangelical Oxford Group at university and told an interviewer in 1963 that ‘I have religious beliefs and they very much affected my political views’.<sup>6</sup> Heath’s attitude to religion was more similar to Home’s, in that he did not speak openly about it – as he told James Margach in 1965: ‘It’s not a thing one talks about very much but it has a secure hold’, but when reminiscing in his

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<sup>3</sup> For further elucidation of this helpful breakdown of modes of secularisation, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Alistair Horne, *Harold Macmillan: Vol I. 1894-1956* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 34; Alistair Horne, *Harold Macmillan: Vol. II 1957-1986* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 611.

<sup>5</sup> D.R. Thorpe, *Alec Douglas-Home* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1997), 62.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 41.

memoirs, he did also claim that: ‘My Christian faith also provided foundations for my political beliefs...I was influenced by the teaching of William Temple (former Archbishop of Canterbury)’.<sup>7</sup> Callaghan’s mother was ‘deeply religious and fundamentalist’. He became a Sunday school teacher in the late 1920s and although he claimed to turn away from his Baptist upbringing when his activities in the Labour Party increasingly had the ‘first charge on my energies’, he also stated in his memoirs that he owed an ‘immense debt’ to his Christian upbringing and that he had never ‘escaped its influence’.<sup>8</sup> Major, on the other hand, whilst professing belief in God – ‘I do believe. I don’t pretend to understand all the complex parts of Christian theology, but I simply accept it...[I pray] in all circumstances’ – seemed to be uncomfortable with the whole issue: ‘I was mortally embarrassed to be interviewed about my religious faith on Radio 4’s Sunday programme’.<sup>9</sup> And of course Tony Blair famously admitted to praying to God for guidance when preparing for the Iraq war of 2003.<sup>10</sup>

All of these politicians shared the characteristic of feeling able to talk about their faith once out of the political limelight, as if their religion was a private matter that did not (or if it did, should not be known to) influence their political thinking whilst in office. Indeed, the case of Blair is an example *par excellence*. Whilst in office, Blair’s press secretary Alastair Campbell famously told reporters, ‘We don’t do God’. But Blair himself was deeply religious; he attended Church regularly though was cautiously guarded about speaking about his faith during his premiership. On leaving office, however, Blair left the Church of England to join the Catholic Church, and spoke candidly about his fear of being labelled ‘a nutter’, for speaking openly about his religious beliefs. As Blair told the congregation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A biography* (London: Pimlico, 1993), 258; Edward Heath, *The Autobiography of Edward Heath: The Course of My life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 33.

<sup>8</sup> James Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London: Collins, 1987), 25-40.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Anthony Seldon, *Major: A Political Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997), 678; John Major, *John Major: The Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 195.

<sup>10</sup> Blair interview with Michael Parkinson on *Parkinson*, ITV broadcast on 4 March 2006.

Holy Trinity Brompton Church in 2009: ‘If you have religious faith in the end it’s the most important thing in your life; it is not the adjunct, it is the core.’<sup>11</sup>

This is where Thatcher marked such a discontinuity with Prime Ministers of the past (and future). She felt no hesitation in addressing the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland as a ‘Christian, as well as a politician’.<sup>12</sup> Throughout her career she constantly referred to the importance of religion, both in a social and personal context. It is the aim of this paper to investigate the formation of Thatcher’s religious beliefs, how she applied them in a political context, and how these religious beliefs were both perceived and received at the time.

### **A selective history**

As the longest serving British Prime Minister of the twentieth century, and the only female one, it is unsurprising that Thatcher has generated an enormous wealth of literature. In terms of biographies alone, there have been at least twenty-five.<sup>13</sup> In order to highlight the dearth of historiography on the subject of Thatcher and religion, four genres of historical work will be examined: autobiography, biography, religious commentaries, and political commentaries.

The 1990s marked a quiet period in terms of biographical and political writings on Thatcher ostensibly because scholars of the period were waiting for Thatcher’s memoirs to be released. In both *The Downing Street Years* (1993, henceforth *TDSY*) and *The Path to Power* (1995, henceforth *TPTP*), the extent of Thatcher’s belief in the importance of religious values, derived from Biblical scripture, is brazenly apparent.

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio E. Weiss, “God and the prime ministers”, *Guardian*, 9 February 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Thatcher, Speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 21 May 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>. For video clips of the speech, please see: <http://video.stv.tv/bc/news-020509-thatcher-sermon/>

<sup>13</sup> E.H.H. Green, *Thatcher* (New York: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 1.

Though *TDSY*'s focus is understandably political, there are clear examples of Thatcher's keen interest in theological issues. For instance, she stresses the deep impression left on her by the American theologian and sociologist Michael Novak, who sought to frame political ideologies into a moral and social framework.<sup>14</sup> And more explicitly, after the Brighton Bombing, Thatcher wrote that she 'could only think of one thing to do. Crawfie [her aide] and I knelt by the side of our beds and prayed for some time in silence'.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas *TDSY* is more focussed on Thatcher's political career, *TPTP* offers a clearer exposition of her political and moral formation. Recalling her 'intensely religious' family home, Thatcher claimed how the sermons she heard in the Methodist chapel every Sunday 'made a great impact' on her.<sup>16</sup> Indeed the Methodist values she was brought up with as a child did not diminish once she left home. Thatcher noted that 'religion also figured large in my Oxford life', but perhaps more importantly, when she made the switch to Anglicanism that some saw as a repudiation of her Methodist upbringing, she retorted: 'John Wesley regarded himself as a member of the Church of England to his dying day. I did not feel that any great theological divide had been crossed'.<sup>17</sup> Writing in 1995, Thatcher felt that 'we still have to find some way of combining Christian charity with sensible social policy'.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of Thatcher's explicit references to her faith throughout her career and in her memoirs, rather astoundingly no biographer has focussed in detail on her religious beliefs. Russell Lewis' early biography of Margaret Thatcher (1975) is a perfect example. There is mention of her father, Alfred Roberts, as 'a staunch Methodist, lay preacher [and] a three-times-on-Sunday chapel attender', but nothing else regarding the then Conservative leader's moral and religious formation.<sup>19</sup> Patricia Murray's exploration into the life of the first female

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 627.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Russell Lewis, *Margaret Thatcher* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 11.

Prime Minister is perhaps even more puzzling in that it explicitly mentions her Christianity, yet makes little of it. Gobbets of views on Thatcher are presented, one of which is political commentator Paul Johnson's resignation speech from the Labour Party. Johnson makes the claim that Thatcher 'is the first proper Christian as a political leader that we've had for a very long time'.<sup>20</sup> Yet Murray makes no attempt to investigate the issue further. Penny Junor's 1983 biography of Thatcher is another case in point. Of Thatcher she wrote: 'she has attended the village church at Chequers more frequently than any of her predecessors. Religious beliefs have very obviously inspired a great many of her actions'.<sup>21</sup> Yet again, the question of the nature of her religious belief is not pursued.

Clearly her early biographers viewed her Christianity as something new, yet neither they nor any historians have made much of this. Andrew Thomson's biography (1988) stressed the distinction between 'born-again' Christians in the Conservative Party whose focus was on the Gospels, and Thatcher's more Old Testament-Pauline doctrine that responsibility lies with the individual, not the State. As her constituency agent for Finchley, and thus close aide of Thatcher, it would seem sensible to pay attention to his claim that 'she likes to have around her politicians and aides who are deeply religious' (see pages 36-37). Thomson paints a picture of a deeply religious Prime Minister whose principal ideals are to be found in the 'parable of the talents'.<sup>22</sup> Even so, Thomson's section on Thatcher and religion amounts to little more than six pages.

By far the most comprehensive biographies of Thatcher are separated by more than a decade – Hugo Young's *One of Us* (1989) and John Campbell's two-volume *Margaret Thatcher* (2000, 2003). The late Young (a 'Catholic, born bred, and roughly still believing' he called himself in 1992) provided by far the most hitherto sustained analysis of Thatcher's religion, tempestuous relationship with the Church of England, and friendship with the Chief

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<sup>20</sup> Patricia Murray, *Margaret Thatcher* (London: WH Allen, 1980), 65.

<sup>21</sup> Penny Junor, *Margaret Thatcher* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1983), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Thatcher* (London: WH Allen, 1989), 64-9.

Rabbi, Immanuel (later Lord) Jakobovits.<sup>23</sup> For Young, Thatcher ‘thought about religious questions more than most prime ministers have publicly admitted doing’.<sup>24</sup> Campbell’s text effectively built upon Young’s framework, but with the ability to relate to Thatcher’s memoirs. Both Campbell and Young highlight her disappointment with the Church of England’s ‘wetness’ in its support for collectivist values. Yet in spite of being the most authoritative works on Thatcher, the issue of her religion and its practical implications is devoted less than seven pages by Campbell and nine by Young.

Thatcher’s government marked the nadir of Church-State relations in the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Hitherto *ad nauseum* described as the ‘Tory Party at prayer’, the Anglican Church effectively broke ranks with the government over its handling of social policy, amongst other things. Historians and political commentators were keenly aware of the fact at the time. In early 1983 the *New Statesman* published an article by Raphael Samuel entitled “The Tory Party at Prayer” highlighting this breakdown in relations.<sup>26</sup> In 1989, the novelist Jonathan Raban released a fascinating (and rather irreverent) pamphlet entitled, *God, Man & Mrs Thatcher*.<sup>27</sup> Exploring in detail Thatcher’s speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (infamously dubbed the ‘Sermon on the Mound’), Raban was one of few contemporaries who took Thatcher’s religious rhetoric as seriously as she meant it. Despite its brevity – only 73 pages – it is one of the few good analyses of Thatcher’s religious sermons and will be returned to later.

Published by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), Henry Clark’s *The Church under Thatcher* (1993) also described the breakdown in relations between the Church and State in the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> Beginning with the General Synod’s courting

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<sup>23</sup> *Guardian*, 23 September 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London: Macmillan 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1991), 418.

<sup>25</sup> Here ‘Church’ refers to the Church of England.

<sup>26</sup> *New Statesman*, 23 January 1983.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Raban, *God, Man & Mrs Thatcher* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Henry Clark, *The Church under Thatcher* (London: SPCK, 1993).

of unilateralist sentiments with the publication of *The Church and the Bomb* (1981) and culminating in the *Faith in the City* (1985) report furore, that attacked the government's social policies and neglect of the poor in inner-city areas, a chain of events is drawn up where it is possible to trace how by the 1987 election, according to a Guardian poll, less than a third of the Synod voted Conservative.<sup>29</sup>

Bradley's *Marching to the promised land: has the Church a future?*, attempted to place Thatcher's political ideologies in a theological light. According to Bradley, she was of a conservative, quietist, Old Testament theology, whereas the liberal welfare consensus she sought to dismantle was borne out of a 'Kingdom theology' of the Gospels New Testament creed.<sup>30</sup> The works of Samuel, Raban, Bradley, and Clark highlight two things: firstly, that there was undoubtedly a perceived change in the nature of Church-State relations; and secondly, the lack of any subsequent sustained analysis on the topic suggests it has not been of much interest to either academics or political commentators.

Even general works on religion in twentieth century Britain seem to ignore the Thatcher era. Hastings' *A History of English Christianity* makes almost no mention of Thatcher, and whilst Machin, Brown, and Davie acknowledge the fallout between the Church of England and Thatcher governments, none take the claims of her faith seriously.<sup>31</sup> McLeod's *Religion and the People of Western Europe* accurately identifies Thatcher as a 'committed Christian', however as this paper will show McLeod is far off the mark when he argues that she used 'religious language only when addressing specifically Christian audiences'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> David Martin, "The Churches: Pink Bishops and the Iron Lady", in *The Thatcher Effect*, eds. Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (New York: OUP, 1989), 330-341.

<sup>30</sup> Ian C. Bradley, *Marching to the promised land* (London: John Murray, 1992), 125.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2001); G.I.T. Machin, *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 211-229; Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 2006), 288-9; Grace Davie, *Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 140-171.

<sup>32</sup> Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 150.

The view that Church-State relations are of little interest to historians and political commentators in the second half of twentieth century Britain is buttressed by the literature on period. Of the political commentaries on Thatcher's premiership, Kavanagh and Seldon's *The Thatcher Effect* was probably the most authoritative early work. In it, an article by the Emeritus Professor of Sociology at LSE, David Martin, entitled "The Churches: Pink Bishops and the Iron Lady" effectively became the most influential piece on all analyses of Church-State relations in the 1980s. Martin acknowledged that 'the government has shown more interest in religious matters than almost any since Gladstone's' and highlighted how the Churches, along with the universities, broadcasters, and 'ousted grandees of the old Tory Party' who still believed in Disraeli's 'One Nation Toryism', had become defenders of the liberal welfare consensus of the post-war era which Thatcher was seeking to destroy.<sup>33</sup> Martin also noted how Thatcher was keen to make clear that Conservatism and Christianity were not incompatible, but that she faced difficulties in doing so when she found out that the majority of the Synod voted for the Alliance in the mid-1980s.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of whether Martin's analysis is sound (which it largely is), what is fascinating is that there has been no further exploration of the theme since his 1989 article. Riddell, Evans, Campbell, and Green's works either ignore the issue or restate Martin's analysis.<sup>35</sup> Only one article, in 2003, explores the issue of Thatcher's relationship with her Jewish constituents in Finchley and its implication for her stress of 'Judaean-Christian values'.<sup>36</sup> Yet given the wealth of literature devoted to other aspects of her character – her femininity, dress, lower-middle-class upbringing, and relationship with her mother – it nonetheless seems odd so little is made of her religion.

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<sup>33</sup> Martin, "Pink Bishops", 330-341.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-340.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Era* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Eric Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (London: Routledge, 1997); Green, *Thatcher*.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Dellheim, "More Estonians than Etonians", in *The Political Legacy of Margaret Thatcher*, Stanislaw Pugliese ed. (London: Politico, 2003), 252-264.

## **Overview of the paper**

This paper proceeds as follows. The introduction highlights both the dearth of historical literature on the nature of Margaret Thatcher's religious beliefs, and those of previous British Prime Ministers. In Part I, entitled 'Formation', Margaret Thatcher's upbringing is considered. Here, the nature of the relationship with her father is seen to be of great significance, as well as the Methodist values with which she was raised. Previously inaccessible sources in the form of Alfred Roberts' sermon notes are used to reappraise radically all past analyses of Roberts' religious beliefs. In Part II, entitled 'Application', the nature of Thatcher's religious beliefs is explored with reference to three sermons she delivered during her time as Conservative leader, as well as her literary readings, political actions, and numerous interviews. In Part III, entitled 'Reception', the deteriorating Church-State relationship of the 1980s is examined, whilst also paying attention to the reception of Mrs Thatcher's religious beliefs amongst politicians, fellow Christians and the press. In the conclusion, the findings of the paper are placed in the context of the historiographical neglect of religion in British politics in the twentieth century and several new areas of research are suggested in order to understand the relationship between religion and politics better.

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## **PART I: FORMATION**

### **The family unit**

Pervasive in Margaret Thatcher's descriptions of her upbringing has been the emphasis placed on the unity of her family. In 1980 she told the barrister and sometime journalist Patricia Murray: 'we were a very close family and most of the things we did we tended to do together'.<sup>1</sup> Later, in her autobiography, Thatcher expressed these sentiments again, stating that: 'Living over the shop children see far more of their parents than in most other walks of life...we had much more time to talk than some other families, for which I have always been grateful.'<sup>2</sup>

However, much stress has been placed specifically on Thatcher's relationship with her father, to the extent that Peter Hennessy once claimed that the country was being ruled 'from beyond the grave' by Alderman Roberts.<sup>3</sup> Standing at 6ft 2in with distinctive pebble glasses, striking blond hair and light blue eyes, Alfred Roberts was an impressive figure of the Grantham community. Engaged in the circles of business, politics and religion, he was shopkeeper of the greengrocers on 1 North Parade (and later bought another outlet half a mile away on Hungtingtower Road), a prominent local politician, and popular Methodist lay preacher.<sup>4</sup> Thatcher attached great significance to her relationship with Alderman Roberts. On the steps of Downing Street when entering for the first time as Prime Minister, she turned to the cameras and announced (before her infamous cribbing of St Francis of Assisi's

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<sup>1</sup> Murray, *Thatcher*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Campbell, *Grocer's Daughter*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> In his role as local politician, Roberts held his seat on the Council and chaired the Finance Committee. In other areas he was at differing times - President of the Chamber Trade, President of Rotary, Director of the Grantham Building Society and the Trustee Savings Bank, Chair of the local National Savings Movement, Governor of the Boys' and Girls' grammar schools, chair of the Workers' Education Association, and Chief Welfare Officer in charge of civil defence during the war. In 1943 he was elected Alderman and from 1945-6 (after having rejected the post 5 years earlier) served as town Mayor. *Ibid.*, 12.

prayer): 'I owe almost everything to my father'.<sup>5</sup> Such homage to her deceased father was upheld throughout her premiership, and after. In an interview with Miriam Stoppard on *Woman to Woman* in 1985 she wept when recounting the day her father was ousted from the Council by the post-war Labour majority on the Council – some thirty-two years after the incident (which according to the *Grantham Journal* brought the aldermanic elections into 'turmoil') occurred.<sup>6</sup> And in her memoirs, Thatcher again stressed the intensity of her filial bond, declaring: 'I was so much his daughter'.<sup>7</sup>

By comparison, Thatcher's reluctance to speak openly about her mother brought about speculation as to the peculiarities of their relationship.<sup>8</sup> Ostensibly, Beatrice Roberts (née Stephenson) was in Thatcher's eyes a devoted housewife, but of little importance outside the domestic sphere. Her memoirs recall a mother who 'showed me how to iron a man's shirt in the correct way and to press embroidery without damaging it' and 'just what it meant it to cope with a household so that everything worked like clockwork'.<sup>9</sup> Much was made out of Thatcher's obfuscation of her mother's memory in her *Who's Who* entry, yet as Campbell points out, about half the entries of prominent women in that edition did not mention their mothers. But it does seem apparent that Thatcher felt that she had grown apart from her mother – both spatially and as a representation of female domesticity – telling Geoffrey Winn in 1961 that, 'after I was fifteen we had nothing more to say to each other. It wasn't her fault. She was weighed down by the home, always being in the home.'<sup>10</sup> A similar attitude towards her older sister, Muriel Cullen, is rumoured too.<sup>11</sup> Less academically

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<sup>5</sup> Interview on the steps of 10 Downing Street, 4 May 1979, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104078>

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Thatcher interview with Miriam Stoppard, *Woman to Woman*, Yorkshire Television, broadcast on 19 November 1985, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105830>; *Grantham Journal*, 1952 in John R. Pinchbeck, *Grantham in the News 1925-1950* (Grantham: Scott Willoughby, 2000)

<sup>7</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 163.

<sup>8</sup> See Leo Abse, *Margaret, daughter of Beatrice*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, *Grocer's Daughter*, 18; quoted in *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell claims that Muriel stole her husband from Thatcher in 1949, and that the two did not speak often. *ibid.*, 22.

minded and far closer to her mother than Margaret, she later trained and worked as a physiotherapist in the Midlands. Until her death she refused to speak candidly on the Roberts family dynamic or about her relationship with her sister.<sup>12</sup> Whatever Muriel would have said, it seems likely that she would have described the young Margaret Roberts as someone who was ambitious, academically driven and far closer to her father than to her mother.

### **A Methodist upbringing**

The Methodist Church into which Margaret Roberts entered was in the midst of a reappraisal of its beliefs and practices. The Methodist Union of 1932 had brought under one umbrella organisation Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists and United Methodists (who formed in 1907 from the Methodist New Connexion, Bible Christians and United Methodist Free Churches).<sup>13</sup> However, the union (which itself is representative of the renewed determination of religious denominations to revive Christianity in Britain in the 1930s) was not wholly successful and the divisions between the denominations – though not theologically of great significance – manifested themselves through political means. Ten years earlier, seventy-six Wesleyan ministers voiced their disapproval of the union by signing a counter-manifesto recommending continued separation of the denominations. Writing on the issue, the Rev. J. Ernest highlighted one of the key reasons: ‘nothing has characterised Wesleyan Methodism more than its determination not to support a particular party...can this really be claimed of Primitive Methodism?’<sup>14</sup> Primitive Methodism had established itself primarily in northern working-class towns and in particular, had become known as the religion of coal miners. As such, Robert Blatchford complained of the ‘lily-livered Methodists who controlled the ILP’ as Primitive Methodism largely affiliated itself

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup> J.M. Turner, *Modern Methodism in England 1932-1988* (London: Epworth Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Methodist Recorder*, 8 June 1922.

with the Labour party in the interwar period.<sup>15</sup> Wesleyan Methodism, on the other hand was usually associated with middle-class professionals and United Methodists were on the whole artisans and skilled workers.<sup>16</sup>

Largely for reasons of variation in the financial soundness of the different Methodist churches in the area, Grantham retained the aforementioned Methodist divisions by refusing to accept the union until May 1944.<sup>17</sup> Alfred Roberts – who by the time of the union was a senior Methodist figure in the town and was Chairman of the Wesleyan Methodist Circuit Finance Committee – and his family were Methodists, and specifically, Wesleyan Methodists. As Campbell notes, there was a Primitive Methodist chapel a stone's throw from their residence at 1 North Parade and a Free Methodist chapel not much further, yet Alfred and Beatrice chose to walk to the Finkin Street Wesleyan Church in the centre of Grantham, a third of a mile away from the house. There is much of significance in this point; Wesleyan Methodists in a doctrinal sense were more 'High Church' and rather more closely resembled the Anglican Church than the other Methodist denominations, so when Thatcher in later life made the switch to the Church of England she could at least tell herself the change was of little theological significance.

Thatcher's claim that the Roberts' family life 'revolved around Methodism' is well substantiated.<sup>18</sup> She and her sister would usually attend Sunday school in the morning and afternoon, as well as the Sunday service and occasionally the evening service too.<sup>19</sup> Thatcher recounted to the Tory MP George Gardiner how on Sunday evenings 'the church would have a visiting preacher, and after the service he would generally return with other church people

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<sup>15</sup> J.M. Turner, "Methodism in England 1900-1932" in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* vol.3, E. Davies and G. Rupp eds., (London: Epworth Press, 1983), 358.

<sup>16</sup> Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1963), 151.

<sup>17</sup> Lincolnshire Country Archives, Wesleyan Circuit minutes METH B9-5

<sup>18</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

to the household for supper and for further religious discussions.’<sup>20</sup> On Tuesdays Margaret would sometimes attend a church-based sewing circle with her mother and on Fridays she and her sister would frequent the Methodist guild. As she told Patricia Murray, ‘our pleasure was really confined to church socials but don’t forget a tremendous social life does revolve around the church.’<sup>21</sup> When compared with other children being brought up in Methodist households in the same era, it becomes apparent that such strict religiosity and adherence of the Sabbath was commonplace. Margaret Penn recalled the ‘two sessions of Sunday school plus a chapel meal and worship’ in thirties Manchester and Don Howarth reminisced of his Sundays in a forties Wesleyan chapel in Lancashire as being ‘familiar, welcoming and solid’.<sup>22</sup>

Whether or not the young Margaret enjoyed such an emphasis on church social life is not entirely clear. According to Campbell, she did not. Certainly, Thatcher did say how it was the ‘musical side of Methodism which I liked best’ and that she ‘used to envy the young Catholic girls...dressed in white party dresses with bright ribbons...the Methodist style was much plainer’.<sup>23</sup> She told Miriam Stoppard how ‘it was rather a sin to enjoy yourself by entertainment...Life wasn’t to enjoy yourself; life was to work and do things’, and she confided to her chief speech-writer Ronald Millar that ‘I think it would have been a little better to have been a little bit less [to church]’.<sup>24</sup> Yet on the other hand, it was hardly surprising for a young girl like Margaret to ‘kick against’ such a childhood; that she liked music best should be expected given she was a budding piano player; moreover, what little girl would not pine for brighter ribbons and more colourful dresses if she saw them in front of her doorstep (quite literally – there was a Roman Catholic church opposite the house on

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<sup>20</sup> George Gardiner, *Margaret Thatcher* (London: Kimber, 1975), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, *Grocer’s Daughter*, 17-18; Murray, *Thatcher*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Penn, *Manchester Fourteen Miles* (London: Futura, 1982), 177; Don Haworth, *Figures in a Bygone Landscape* (London: Methuen, 1986), 213.

<sup>23</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Campbell, *Grocer’s Daughter*, 24; Ronald Millar, *A View from the Wings* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, 1993), 333.

North Parade)?<sup>25</sup> And, her father's puritanical emphasis on abstinence, thrift, and frugality would be hard to comprehend for most young children.

Regardless, it is clear that Thatcher's upbringing had a profound impact on her. In her autobiography she recalled the 'sermon voice' her father adopted when preaching, and how the 'sermons we heard every Sunday made a great impact on me'.<sup>26</sup> Throughout her political career, Thatcher would frequently use examples from her past with reference to political issues; as junior minister in the late fifties she wanted to scrap the earnings rule for widows because she recalled the 'heartbreaking sight of a recently widowed mother eking out her tiny income by buying bruised fruits at my father's shop at Grantham'.<sup>27</sup> On the steps of Number Ten in 1979 she recalled how her father 'brought me up to believe all the things I do believe'.<sup>28</sup> And in her speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988 she reflected on her upbringing when saying: 'I think back to the discussions in my early life when we all agreed that if you try to take the fruits of Christianity without its roots, the fruits will wither.'<sup>29</sup> The memory of Thatcher's childhood loomed large in her adult years.

### **The grocer's daughter**

A common feature of the thrift and frugality of the inter-war years in Britain was the maximisation of household goods, and in particular stationery. As such, Margaret Roberts' school exercise books did not just contain her jottings from her last chemistry lesson, but also her father's sermon notes. No historian has thus far analysed in detail the contents of the

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<sup>25</sup> Miriam Stoppard interview, 19 November 1985 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105830>.

<sup>26</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 5; *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> The earnings rule reduced entitlements to the state pension if earnings exceeded a given amount. *Ibid.*, 123

<sup>28</sup> Interview on entering Downing Street, 4 May 1979, *CD-ROM* or

<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104078>.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Thatcher, Speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 21 May 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

notes. Their date of creation is unknown, though it is suggested to be around 1943.<sup>30</sup> Totalling nearly forty pages, they offer a striking insight into Alfred Roberts' religious convictions, as well as his intellectual curiosities.

From the sermon notes, the extent to which Roberts' Methodism was a religion of personal responsibility becomes apparent. Campbell describes this as 'a religion of personal salvation', but this portrayal rather misses the key theological question of how this 'personal salvation' was to be obtained.<sup>31</sup> Roberts stresses how 'strength comes from within' and how 'a religion of veracity must always be rooted in spiritual inwardness'.<sup>32</sup> From the sermon notes it becomes evident from where Thatcher gained the intensity of her moral convictions. When Alfred Roberts preached to his daughter 'never do things just because other people do them' and 'make up your own mind what you are going to do and persuade people to go your way', he did so to his congregation too: 'you must yourself, believe intensely and with total conviction if you are to persuade others to believe. Strive to be utterly dedicated to your work'.<sup>33</sup> For Roberts the ability to attain salvation was immanent to the individual, and it was the duty of each person to find it. Years later Thatcherism's unique brand of individualism would paraphrase and manipulate these sentiments with reference to the welfare state.

In perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of Thatcher's background, John Campbell makes the claim that Roberts' Methodism was 'fundamentalist [and] Bible-based'.<sup>34</sup> However, examination of Roberts' sermon notes instead highlights a clear belief in modern evolutionary theory and an outright rejection of fundamentalism – very much contrary to Campbell's claims. For example, writing on the problems that arose during early

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<sup>30</sup> Personal interview .

<sup>31</sup> Campbell, *Grocer's Daughter*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Alfred Roberts sermon notes, Thatcher Archives, THCR 1/9/8 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109905> .

<sup>33</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 6; Gardiner, *Thatcher*, 20; Thatcher Archives, THCR 1/9/8 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109905>

<sup>34</sup> Campbell, *Grocer's Daughter*, 16.

man's battle for survival between sparring tribes and the need for an arbitrator of these conflicts, Roberts presented history as a gradual move away from unrestricted violence towards 'some power of judgement and justice outside themselves who could resolve the differences fairly and impartially'. For Roberts, this was 'man's first conception of the sheer necessity of a being "higher, wiser, and more understanding than themselves"'. Not a mere human but a superhuman they could only name a God'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, whereas the standard Christian doctrine teaches that God reveals himself to man, for Roberts, God emerged as a feature of evolutionary force.

Such overtures to liberal intellectual thought, Darwinian evolutionism and Herbert Spencer's (whose works adorned Roberts' bookshelf) organicism in Roberts' notes are striking. He repeatedly commented on the 'sheer necessity...of a ...God' and 'conflicts of interest' resulting in a 'power of justice and judgement'. Indeed, they became even more so as he explicitly repudiated fundamentalist theology stating: 'Orthodoxy, tradition and Fundamentalism may be a guide for some, but they must never become our chains'.<sup>36</sup> Roberts was patently un-Pietistic regarding his faith. In the context of the aforementioned identity crisis of Methodism, Roberts' evolutionary conviction could be firmly placed in what Davies has labelled the 'liberal position' of Methodist preachers 'in the twenties...which...reduced the deity of Christ by heavy emphasis on the "Jesus of History" [and] treated the Bible as the record of man's progressive discovery of God'.<sup>37</sup> Crucially therefore, whatever the explicit theological ramifications of Roberts' beliefs, his conception of divinity was of a liberal disposition, deeply infused with intellectual and secular theory and evidently *not* of a fundamentalist ilk nor of an evangelical one.

Buttressing this point and *pace* Campbell's assertion of Roberts' preaching being 'Bible-based', the literary and intellectual breadth of his reading is distinctive. Whether

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<sup>35</sup> Thatcher Archives, THCR 1/9/8 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109899>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109899>.

<sup>37</sup> Davies, *Methodism*, 149.

Alderman Roberts really was the ‘best read man’ his youngest child ever knew is a moot point, but his preaching was far from confined to scripture alone.<sup>38</sup> In fact, whilst in passing Roberts’ notes echo or quote St Augustine, Nicodemus, Pope Gregory I and Luther, there is far greater weight attributed to secular theory than theological authority. As we have already seen, he drew on Darwin and Spencer’s theories, but also quoted William Wordsworth’s poem on the Haitian revolutionary leader, Toussaint Louverture; wrote of the importance of ‘fellowship with great minds of the past’; invoked Aristotle’s exposition of physical potentiality whilst sermonising that ‘belief about God is one thing, knowing God is another’; quoted extensively from Alexander Pope; and evoked Jeffersonian and Lockean language when speaking of ‘self-evident truths’.<sup>39</sup> Indeed the over-arching theme of personal responsibility that runs through Roberts’ sermon notes brings to mind Mill’s *On Liberty* which he carefully absorbed. Perhaps even more tellingly, Roberts does not appear to have made any mention of the traditional theological works which inspired Victorian piety – Foxe, Bunyan, and Wesley – all of which would have been easily accessible in the period.

Thatcher wrote in her memoirs of her father constantly encouraging her to read, and the list of the weekly publications the Roberts household subscribed to suggest that his preaching was influenced by far more than just Biblical scripture. Receiving the *Methodist Recorder* (which in 1945 mentioned Roberts’ rise to mayor and in 1970 announced his passing), the literary magazine *John O’London’s Weekly*, the social affairs journal *Picture Post* and the quarterly review of religion, theology, and philosophy *The Hibbert Journal*, it is evident that Alfred Roberts read keenly and widely and his sermons were affected accordingly.<sup>40</sup> By comparison, Edgar Fortescue’s memories of his Methodist preacher father in the early twentieth century are dominated by the image of his father with a Bible and

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Young, *One of Us*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Alfred Roberts sermon notes, Thatcher Archives, THCR 28/4/42 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109899>

<sup>40</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 22; *John O’ London’s Anthology* (London: Darwen Finlayson, 1961); *The Hibbert Journal*, 1940-1; *Methodist Recorder*; *Picture Post 1938-1950* (London: Allen Lane, 1970).

dictionary at hand when writing his sermons – ‘these two books were the only ones I ever saw him read’.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most striking example of Roberts being neither a religious fundamentalist, nor an evangelical (which Hugo Young, rather erroneously, described Thatcher as) is highlighted by one of the eleven year-old Margaret’s ‘most treasured possessions’ – a special edition of the Theosophist magazine, *Bibby’s Annual*.<sup>42</sup> This publication, voicing a view based on a ‘mixture of mysticism, Christianity and the wisdom of the East’ (as Thatcher herself described it later in life) would have been bordering on sacrilegious to a fundamentalist, Bible-based, evangelical preacher.<sup>43</sup> Instead, it clearly must have had Roberts’ tacit, if not explicit approval, for it to have been given to and kept by his daughter Margaret.

Equally apparent from the sermon notes is Roberts’ stress on ecumenism. This would seem paradoxical given his attendance at a Wesleyan Chapel and supposed opposition to the Methodist reunion. Nevertheless, Roberts explicitly states:

All of us must avoid the presumptuous claim that any one way of any church has a special prerogative where the Holy Spirit of God is concerned...I believe, and hope and pray it may be achieved, that what the world needs is one Holy Catholic Church with diversity of administration but the same Spirit and Lord’.<sup>44</sup>

This ecumenism may have been part of a wider drive to serve both the community and God. Roberts certainly had a sense of duty to community and belief in the importance of local politics that Thatcher would not share in later life; Roberts invoked liberal concerns as he preached on the delicate balance between the ‘conflict of the individual and of the community’ and, in his political capacities, campaigned against animal torture and ‘all-in-

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<sup>41</sup> Edgar Fortescue, *My Journey Through the Twentieth Century 1903-1996* (Nantwich: Wesley Historical Publishing Office, 1997), 20.

<sup>42</sup> Young, *One of Us*, 419; Thatcher Archives, not yet catalogued; Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Alfred Roberts sermon notes, THCR 28/4/42 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109900>.

wrestling in Grantham’ on the grounds it was ‘at variance with the Council’s wishes to uplift people both in body and mind’, highlighting all his Nonconformist heritage in the process.<sup>45</sup>

When Roberts preached to his congregation on the ‘fear and insecurities, the sorrows and the sufferings, ignorance, squalor, hunger and want, injustice and oppression...still rampant [in society, which] to be indifferent to...is a betrayal of our Lord and Master’ – in obvious reference to the then recently published Beveridge Report (which the Wesleyan Grantham Methodist Circuit where Roberts was a Circuit Steward expressed its ‘cordial approval’) – he came across as a proponent of liberal social reform and collectivist sentiments.<sup>46</sup> Whilst not in the vein of the liberal socialist Methodist Samuel Keeble (who was rather tellingly renowned for being the first Nonconformist to read and summarise *Das Kapital*), Roberts clearly had a genuine concern for social justice.<sup>47</sup>

This willingness to link religious belief with political concerns was a hallmark of Methodism in this era, and had a clear impact on the young Margaret’s development. In fact, it was a trait which would be solidified in her young adult years too, as a member of the John Wesley Society in Oxford University from 1945-47. As one of her fellow society members of the time recalls, ‘the connection between religion and politics is really part of Methodism’s DNA and would certainly have been emphasised in the Ministries and preaching of Rev. Fred Greeves and Rev.Reg Kiisack [who both preached frequently at the Wesley Society in the period]’.<sup>48</sup>

Whilst Roberts publicly renounced party labels and affiliations – announcing in his Rotary Presidential address in July 1936: “[I am like] a good many people, often hopelessly and utterly in the wilderness in the political world, sometimes believing in one party, sometimes in another” – it is likely that he did so partly out of political expediency in his

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<sup>45</sup> Alfred Roberts sermon notes, THCR 28/4/42 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109898>; *Grantham Journal*, 1932 and 1937 in Pinchbeck, *Grantham in the News 1925-1950*.

<sup>46</sup> Lincolnshire County Archives, METH B9-5.

<sup>47</sup> Michael S. Edwards, *S.E Keeble: The Rejected Prophet*, Chester: Wesley Historical Society, 1977), 12.

<sup>48</sup> Personal interview.

role as a prominent local politician. Whilst loose party ties were a feature of Rotary, during the mid-1930s he was clearly a supporter of the National Government, presenting himself as not having a settled *party* allegiance.<sup>49</sup> And in fact, his religious beliefs appear to share much in common with those of the great Conservative statesman (and Leader of the National Government from 1935-1937) of Margaret's early years, Stanley Baldwin.

Baldwin, an Anglican of Methodist upbringing, shared with Roberts a belief in non-sectarian Christianity and a clear desire to link Christian morals with political convictions. As A.G. Gardiner, the veteran Liberal journalist wrote of Baldwin, 'he has none of the attributes so common to the politician... [rather] he belongs to the pulpit...and raises grave issues in the spirit of the preacher rather than that of the statesman'.<sup>50</sup> Like Baldwin, Roberts was unafraid to explicitly link his faith with his political beliefs, a trait that the young Margaret would learn to make her own in her later political life.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Roberts' notes highlight many themes that would feature in 1980s Britain. His emphasis on personal responsibility would form the backbone of Thatcherism's focus on individualism; his ecumenism would manifest itself in Thatcher's switch to Anglicanism and admiration for the Jews; his religious convictions passed onto her would result in the intense anger (and aggression) directed at what she perceived as the Church of England's inability to follow the Thatcherite creed of individualism; his doctrinal liberalism infused with intellectual interest allowed Thatcher to refer to herself as a 'Christian, as well as a politician' whilst also stating that 'the Bible...tells us very little

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<sup>49</sup> *The Grantham Journal*, 11 July 1936. However, from the 1950s onwards Roberts – probably in large part as a result of Margaret's work with the Conservative Party – began to appear at partisan Conservative events.

<sup>50</sup> Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 337.

directly about political systems or social programmes'; and his stress on moral conviction were fundamental to Thatcher's exultations of 'Victorian virtues' and 'conviction politics'.<sup>51</sup>

John Campbell suggests that much of the stories surrounding Thatcher's upbringing are 'in fact a supremely successful exercise in image management'. He asserts that the 'impression is inescapable that Margaret was very much less devoted to her wonderful father while he was alive than she became to his sanctified image after he was dead'.<sup>52</sup> Citing Thatcherism's embrace of materialism, the stock-market (gambling), and abandoning a dedication to the whole community in favour of the middle-class, Campbell concludes 'Alf Roberts would have been appalled by Thatcherism'.<sup>53</sup>

This, however, misses the point of Roberts' core beliefs. Roberts may well have been 'appalled' by certain aspects of Thatcherism – notably its materialistic dimension – but it is unlikely that he would have been 'appalled' by Thatcher herself. Thatcher had a genuine, if somewhat complicated sense of social justice (pages 29-30). And the emphasis on personal responsibility, doctrinal liberalism, intellectualism and ecumenism that Roberts preached was adopted (and modified) by his daughter to the extent that she could switch to Anglicanism with a clear conscience, refer to the Parable of the Talents as evidence of God's desire for mankind to be economically efficient, and extol the virtues of the Jewish faith: 'I often wished that...Christians...would take closer note of the Jewish emphasis of self-help and acceptance of personal responsibility'.<sup>54</sup>

Campbell highlights how neither of Thatcher's children had much awareness of their grandparents (Carol Thatcher does not mention her grandmother in her biography of Denis

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<sup>51</sup> Thatcher speech to the Church of Scotland General Assembly, 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>; Margaret Thatcher speech at the Church of the St Lawrence Jewry Speech, 30 March 1978, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103522>.

<sup>52</sup> Campbell, *Grocer's Daughter*, 1; *ibid.*, 33

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-33

<sup>54</sup> Thatcher speech to Conservative Central Council, 23 March 1985, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106000>; Quoted in Campbell, *Iron Lady*, 394.

Thatcher) and that Thatcher herself did not return to Grantham often.<sup>55</sup> This may well be true, and she certainly did not evoke much of a lower-middle class Lincolnshire background by the time that the elocution lessons had removed her accent, she had married a wealthy businessman, and had joined the established Church. But there are records of her returning to Grantham after university – on one occasion to judge a beauty contest – as well as returning to check up on her father’s health.<sup>56</sup> Even after her father’s death she was still dutiful to his widow; visiting her step-mother when she was Education Secretary, her ministerial car sitting outside the house.<sup>57</sup> Regardless, spatial distance from one’s upbringing does not necessitate emotional, moral or intellectual distance too. Indeed, the doctrinal liberalism of her father meant that the core principles of ‘Thatcherism’ – minimal state intervention buttressed by a drive for social improvement through individual betterment (to be encouraged by the Churches) – could be summarised by the following passage:<sup>58</sup>

Render unto to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s  
And unto God the things that are God’s

According to his sermon notes, sometime in the early 1940s Alfred Roberts preached that message in Lincolnshire. On 30<sup>th</sup> March 1978, Thatcher would utter the same passage to the congregation at the Church of the St Lawrence Jewry as an exposition of her own political values.<sup>59</sup> They may have had their differences, but Margaret Thatcher was nevertheless very much ‘the grocer’s daughter’.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>56</sup> *Grantham Journal*, 1946 in Pinchbeck, *Grantham in the News 1925-1950*; Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 163.

<sup>57</sup> Private interview.

<sup>58</sup> For evidence of this, see Thatcher speech to General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

<sup>59</sup> Thatcher speech at the St Lawrence Jewry, 30 March 1978, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103522>.

## PART II: APPLICATION

### A Christian politician

Perhaps more so than any other British Prime Minister from Lord Salisbury to Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher's political career is littered with speeches, interviews and statements highlighting her religious beliefs. From as early as 1951, she spoke of the need to revive Christianity in Britain or else the country and the 'whole world would suffer'; in 1968 she instanced the 'inspiration of the Bible as a guide in national and individual life'; in 1971 she told the *Guardian* journalist Terry Coleman that 'she was a Christian and prayed when she had the need for it', and that 'this was part of her background and upbringing and it would be very difficult to cut herself off from it'. And on the BBC's *Panorama* in 1977, she spoke of the foundations of her faith.<sup>1</sup>

These statements and interviews aside, three key sermons delivered by Thatcher during her time as leader of the Conservative Party and later the country, highlighted the nature of her personal beliefs. The first two were at the church of St Lawrence Jewry in the City of London in 1978 and 1981 (where Enoch Powell and John Nott – a onetime a member of Thatcher's cabinet – had both delivered sermons). The last, and by far the most controversial, was to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (dubbed the 'Sermon on the Mound' by the media) in 1988. In Scotland, she directly confronted all who had criticised the effects her policies had had on the marginalised, with particular reference to the condemnation of her policies by the clergy. In each of these sermons she laid out – with carefully chosen theological examples – the justification for her political beliefs with regard to her religious convictions.

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<sup>1</sup> Thatcher speech opening Dartford Congregational Church from the *Dartford Chronicle*, 23 November 1951, CD-ROM or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/100932>; Thatcher remarks at Bible Exhibition from the *Finchley Press*, 1 November 1968, CD-ROM or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/101633>; *Guardian*, 2 November 1971 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/101923>; *Panorama*, BBC Television, broadcast 11 July 1977 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103259>.

It would seem that such avowals were not mere platitudes designed to find favour with a population of declining religious conviction, rather that they were a genuine reflection of her personal beliefs. Indeed, whilst it would be tempting to suggest that Thatcher's religious pronouncements may have been partly influenced by a desire to appeal to the American Christian right, or the oppressed Christians of Eastern Europe, this seems unlikely. None of her speeches that go into any detail of her religious beliefs were directed at a foreign audience or related to foreign policy issues. Bernard Ingham noted that, whilst Thatcher was not 'pious' and 'hated preaching to colleagues', her 'Nonconformist upbringing was clearly impossible to shake off'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, it was said that her husband, Denis Thatcher, claimed that one of the key principles driving Thatcher was her 'deeply religious conviction'.<sup>3</sup> To those close to her and the wider public, Thatcher's spiritual side was abundantly clear.

Like her father, Thatcher's religion was characterized by theological liberalism and ecumenical tendencies. Though her marriage to the wealthy businessman Denis Thatcher in 1951 took place in the 'very temple of British Methodism', Wesley's Chapel in City Road, London, Thatcher soon made the change to the Church of England. As Young argued, this shift to the established Church was ostensibly for social and political reasons more than a repudiation of her Wesleyan upbringing.<sup>4</sup>

For Thatcher, the Bible advocated two fundamental ideals: personal responsibility and people's freedom to choose. From this vantage point she sought to justify her political convictions. Wealth creation and philanthropy went hand-in-hand with personal responsibility which validated a curtailment of welfare expenditure, and freedom of choice necessitated strong moral leadership from the Churches – which Thatcher frequently felt was lacking.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with Bernard Ingham, Churchill College, 10 October 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Young, *One of Us*, 419.

Thatcher was adamant that this concept of freedom of choice was central to Christianity. In a 1983 television interview she told the mystic Laurens van der Post that ‘the heart of the Christian message is that every person has the right to choose’.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, she claimed that ‘the denial of the morality of personal choice... [is] an outright denial of the Christian faith’ and that ‘the essence of Christianity is not compulsion, but what you do personally’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Crucifixion and Redemption, as Jonathan Raban highlighted, were for Thatcher the ‘supreme act of choice’ – ‘no one took away the life of Jesus, He chose to lay it down’, she recounted from a sermon she had heard in her early years.<sup>7</sup>

For Thatcher, with freedom came great personal responsibility – both to oneself and to each other: ‘we are all members one of another’, she wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, ‘[and this] is expressed most vividly in the Christian concept of the Church as the Body of Christ; from this we learn the importance of interdependence and that the individual achieves his own fulfilment only in service to others and to God’.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, this ‘service to others’ was a duty of the individual and not the state. Significantly, this belief in altruism as being the act (and duty) of the enlightened individual is very much in line with the thought of Herbert Spencer (whom her father was obviously influenced by). And perhaps even more importantly, it flies in the face of an accusation levelled *ad nauseum* – and incorrectly – at Thatcher: that she believed ‘there is no such thing as society’.<sup>9</sup> Thatcher actually went on to state in the next sentence of the interview in which she made the ‘no...society’ comment: ‘the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is

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<sup>5</sup> Thatcher television interview for De Wolfe Productions, 30 December 1982, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104849>; Quoted in Campbell, *Iron Lady*, 391.

<sup>6</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, “Moral basis of a free society”, 16 May 1978, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103687>; Thatcher interview for TV-AM, 7 June 1987, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106561>.

<sup>7</sup> Raban, *God, Man and Mrs. Thatcher*, 32; Thatcher speech to General Assembly, 21 May 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, “Moral”, 16 May 1978 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103687>.

<sup>9</sup> Thatcher interview for *Woman’s Own*, 23 September 1987, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>.

prepared...to turn around and *help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate*'.<sup>10</sup> Here was Thatcher's belief in social justice – that every individual had a responsibility not only to themselves, but to others also.

Politically, Thatcher's beliefs meant she could justify minimal state intervention on religious grounds. She did this explicitly in her 1978 address to the St Lawrence Jewry:

It is one thing to say that the relief of poverty and suffering is a duty and quite another to say that this duty can always be most efficiently and humanely performed by the State. Indeed, there are grave moral dangers and serious practical ones in letting people get away with the idea that they can delegate all their responsibilities to public officials and institutions.<sup>11</sup>

This rather flew in the face of Thatcher's other great mantra regarding the political teachings of the Bible – that essentially, there were none. In each of the three key sermons she delivered on her religious beliefs she mentioned the same passage from Matthew 21:22: 'Render unto Caesar...'. According to Thatcher, this was the closest the Bible came to making political judgements, as she told the congregation of the St Lawrence Jewry:

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...For the truth of the matter is this: the Bible as well as the tradition of the Church tell us very little directly about political systems or social programmes. The nearest we get is Christ telling his disciples to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, unto God that which is God's. No doubt many political judgements rest on moral assumptions, but many of the issues on which we are passionately divided are disputes about fact and expediency. In politics, as Edmund Burke taught us, there are very few universal and permanent truths.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, in Thatcher's mind, religion offered a moral outlook and not a political one.

In practice, the logical end of Thatcher's religious beliefs was twofold. Firstly, wealth creation (rather than the welfare state) – inspired by personal responsibility – was crucial in fostering greater philanthropy in order to combat poverty. Central to this belief was the Parable of the Talents, as Thatcher made clear in an interview for *Der Spiegel* in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Thatcher address to the St Lawrence Jewry, 30 March 1978, *CD-ROM* or

<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103522>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

1987, which stressed the duty of the individual to make the most of what God had given them.<sup>13</sup> Coupled with St Paul's warning to the Thessalonians that 'if a man will not work he shall not eat' (which Thatcher reiterated in her 'Sermon on the Mound'), she was convinced that 'it is not the creation of wealth that is wrong but love of money for its own sake. The spiritual dimension comes in deciding what one does with the wealth'.<sup>14</sup> Recalling the Good Samaritan, Thatcher was able to highlight how in her opinion wealth creation was central to a philanthropic state. In 1980 she told Brian Walden, 'no one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well'.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, if anyone questioned whether the growing income disparity between mining communities in the North and the City was either uncompassionate or against Biblical teaching, Thatcher's retort was essentially the more wealthy individuals, the more potential Good Samaritans.

Secondly (and intimately linked to wealth creation), Thatcher claimed that the country needed spiritual guidance in order for this newly created wealth to be used responsibly. This had two consequences. Firstly, that the Churches should stay out of politics: in a thinly veiled attack on liberal church leaders critical of her politics, she disapprovingly told Conservative Central Council in March 1985 that 'you may have noticed, that these clerical voices have been ranging fairly confidently into the sphere of economic management with their, quite detailed, advice'.<sup>16</sup> It was, in her opinion, not the role of the Church to enter into political debate, rather that it should be concerned with 'spiritual

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<sup>13</sup> Thatcher interview for *Der Spiegel*, 8 September 1987, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106679>.

<sup>14</sup> Thatcher speech to the General Assembly, 21 May 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

<sup>15</sup> Thatcher interview for London Weekend Television, *Weekend World*, 6 January 1980, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104210>.

<sup>16</sup> Thatcher speech to Conservative Central Council, 23 March 1985, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106000>.

redemption, not social reform'.<sup>17</sup> As she summed up in her speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland:

Ideally, when Christians meet, as Christians, to take counsel together their purpose is not (or should not be) to ascertain what is the mind of the majority but what is the mind of the Holy Spirit – something which may be quite different.

Secondly, Thatcher believed that the Churches had a key role to play in spiritual well-being of the country. As she told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: 'your success matters greatly – as much to the temporal as to the spiritual welfare of the nation'.<sup>18</sup> The fundamental cause of the breakdown in Church–State relations in the eighties was because Thatcher believed the Churches were not fulfilling their duty, as she stated to the congregation of the St Lawrence Jewry in 1981:

The church...has clear duties of its own – to preach the gospel of Christ, to celebrate the Sacraments and to give comfort and counsel to men and women struggling with the trials and dilemmas of life...the church can never resign altogether from what are called temporal matters. It has always rightly claimed to set before us the moral standards by which our public affairs should be conducted. But I hope you will forgive me, Rector, for stating what I think these days needs to be pointed out, *namely the difference between defining standards and descending into the political arena to take sides on those practical issues over which many good and honest Christians sincerely disagree*.<sup>19</sup>

Rather unabashedly, as her speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland showed, when Thatcher felt the Churches were not fulfilling their duty, she had no hesitation in making her opinion felt – even if it meant challenging the Churches' own interpretation of the Bible.

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<sup>17</sup> Thatcher speech to the General Assembly, 21 May 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Thatcher speech to the St Lawrence Jewry, 1981, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104587>. Emphasis added.

### **Mrs Thatcher's religious reading**

In contrast to her reputation, and much in the same vein as her father, Thatcher read keenly, especially on theological matters. In late 1988 she told David Frost on TV-AM that she had recently read works by the Chief Rabbi (Jakobovits), C.S. Lewis, Stuart Blanch (former Archbishop of York) and Cardinal Hume, and that she had started to read through the Old Testament, with which she was already familiar.<sup>20</sup> It is crucial to note that these formative texts were both from theological and lay sources – similar to her father's reading. Regardless, this reading was no passive activity – she told Frost that 'parts of the Old Testament should not be [in] untutored hands', fearing deliberate manipulation of the Bible in order for people to conclude, 'Well, I can behave like that!'<sup>21</sup> Similarly, these texts had a great effect on her religious as well as political outlook, as she told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland:

I confess that I had always had difficulty with interpreting the Biblical precept to love our neighbours "as ourselves" until I read some of the words of C.S. Lewis. He pointed out that we don't exactly love *ourselves* when we fall below the standards and beliefs we have accepted. Indeed we might even hate ourselves for some unworthy deed.<sup>22</sup>

Thatcher even seemed to revel in her theological erudition. When Frost asked if she had a favourite text from the Bible, she replied with two: 'there is a psalm', she said, 'is it not 139? It is to the effect that "Lord Thou hast known me, known my every action, known my every deed, known me before I was born"', and 'there is the other one, Psalm 46, "God is my refuge and my strength"'.<sup>23</sup> Unlike McLeod's assertion to the contrary, Thatcher was clearly keen for the British public to know she was a Christian learned in the scriptures.

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *Iron Lady*, 389; Thatcher interview for *TV-AM*, 30 December 1988 or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107022>, *CD-ROM*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Thatcher speech to the General Assembly, 21 May 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

<sup>23</sup> Thatcher interview for *TV-AM*, 30 December 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107022>.

Of course, Thatcher may well have disagreed with much of the theological literature she read, but two authors who she cited as being deeply influential deserve brief mention when analysing her theological mindset. Herbert Agar was, in Hugo Young's words, an 'American thinker and propagandist for American intervention in the Second World War'. His work, *A Time for Greatness*, was said to have been the most influential book in Thatcher's life.<sup>24</sup> Revealingly, much of what Agar wrote on religion prefigured the stress on individualism and personal responsibility of Thatcherite Britain: 'our religious heritage requires of us a belief in the dignity and worth of the common man. Our political institutions have been formed to protect this belief and to give it chance for expression' – Agar's words bore great similarities with the later Thatcherite doctrine of a limited interventionist state.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the American philosopher and theologian Michael Novak (who had studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood) deeply impressed Thatcher with his pronouncements on moral and social issues.<sup>26</sup>

Novak defended the capitalist free market on the grounds that 'given the propensity of humans to sin, it is better to have many employers rather than only one or a few'; claimed that Christianity did not profess to have claims of equality because 'even the angels in Heaven are said to be created by God in ascending hierarchies'; and placed emphasis on the individual over the collective as, he argued, 'in many contexts, it serves even community better to give stronger emphasis to the emerging person'.<sup>27</sup> The writings of these authors highlight three things: that, like her father, Thatcher gave considerable weight to secular writers pronouncing on moral issues; that her religious and political convictions were borne out of a deep and genuine personal interest; and that her disappointment in the Churches'

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<sup>24</sup> Young, *One of Us*, 405.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Agar, *A Time for Greatness*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1943), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 627.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Novak, *Christian Capitalism or Christian Socialism*, (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1984), 11-21.

moral and social pronouncements was real, as she spent hours reading theological literature to both buttress and form her own convictions.

### **Mrs Thatcher's religious beliefs in practice**

Given Thatcher's genuine theological interest, it should come as little surprise that she took great interest in Church affairs, to the extent that in 1989 Hugo Young claimed the Church-State relationship 'engaged the personal attention of Mrs Thatcher more closely than any of her predecessors'.<sup>28</sup> With regard to the appointment of bishops, the Prime Minister's freedom of choice in the matter had been greatly diminished with the introduction of a new system (installed in 1976) whereby Thatcher could only choose from two candidates. Regardless, she took the role seriously, and was keen to prevent the promotion of bishops who she felt did not fit in with the Thatcherite consensus. In 1980 she chose Robert Runcie (who would prove a constant thorn in the government's side for criticising its record on improving poverty and unemployment) over the even more liberal Hugh Montefiore as Archbishop of Canterbury. The following year she reportedly went against the wishes of both Runcie and the Queen in insisting that the Anglo-Catholic Graham Leonard be appointed Bishop of London rather than the liberal John Habgood. In 1987 she again insisted that the vacant see of Birmingham go to Mark Santer, then Bishop of Kensington, rather than the Bishop of Stepney Jim Thompson – a known Labour sympathiser.<sup>29</sup> For Thatcher, Church appointments were crucial if she was to build a new consensus in Britain. She was, however, unable to do so with any great success in Church matters, as she explained to Woodrow Wyatt in 1988: 'they only give me two choices [for the appointment of bishops], both from the left'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Young, *One of Us*, 418.

<sup>29</sup> *Church Times*, 3 April 1981; Young, *One of Us*, 422; Campbell, *Iron Lady*, 389–392.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Curtis, *The Journals of Woodrow Wyatt Vol. I* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 496.

Coincidence or not, Thatcher's Cabinet and personal advisors were often Christians, bearing out Andrew Thomson's claim that 'she likes to have around her politicians and aides who are deeply religious'.<sup>31</sup> Thomson himself was an Elder of the Church of Scotland. Director of Press Communications Harvey Thomas was a born-again-Christian who, in Thomson's words, recounted that 'after he crashed through two floors of the Grand hotel at Brighton after the 1984 IRA bombing and lay above a gaping hole five floors above ground level...he had a conversation with God, [and] he told God that although they had known each other for years, they would be unable to get together in Heaven just yet because his wife's baby was overdue and he was praying to see them both'.<sup>32</sup> John Gummer, Chair of the Conservative Party was a member of the Church of England Synod. Michael Alison, her Parliamentary Private Secretary organised prayer meetings among MPs at Westminster.<sup>33</sup> Quintin Hogg, Lord Chancellor for much of the eighties was a Christian apologist.<sup>34</sup> And amongst others, Robin Harris (deputy head of Policy Unit at Number 10), John O'Sullivan (Policy Unit member and speechwriter), Robin Catford (responsible for ecclesiastical appointments), Christine Wall (Political Press Secretary), Keith Britto (head of Special Services at Conservative Central Office) and Baroness Young were all committed Christians.<sup>35</sup> There may be little of significance in this point, however. Statistically speaking, British politicians in the late twentieth century were more likely to be practising Christians than the average population. As Robin Cook claimed of the New Labour cabinets in which he served, Blair's has an almost 'revivalist spirit to it'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it bears out Thomson's claim about Thatcher's religious entourage, and again suggests that the links between Christianity and politics are an under-researched area of recent British history.

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<sup>31</sup> Thomson, *Thatcher*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 65; personal interviews.

<sup>36</sup> Weiss, *Guardian*, 9 February 2010.

Christians, however, were not the only noticeable religious denomination featuring in the Thatcher governments. As Ted Heath rather crudely put it, ‘there are more old Estonians than old Etonians [in Mrs Thatcher’s Cabinet]’: Jews featured prominently.<sup>37</sup> Whilst the large number of ministers and private advisors she had of Jewish extraction – Keith Joseph, Nigel Lawson, Leon Brittan, David Young, Malcolm Rifkind, Michael Howard, Alfred Sherman, Norman Strauss, David Wolfson, Stephen Sherbourne – may have been coincidental, her self-professed attachment to the Jewish faith was not.

She was first brought into close contact with Judaism when elected MP for Finchley in 1959, where around twenty per cent of the electorate were Jewish. When Jews were excluded from membership of the Finchley Golf Club, Thatcher launched into a successful campaign defending their rights. This, coupled with frequent visits to Jewish synagogues, made her keenly aware of the similarity between the ‘Victorian virtues’ she strongly advocated and the Jewish tradition – namely the principle of self-help.<sup>38</sup> Whilst she strongly, though not blindly, supported the State of Israel (becoming the first British Prime Minister to visit the country), the greatest manifestation of her ease with the Jewish faith came in the form of her relationship with the Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits. On meeting him in 1967, she was said to have found they had much in common and that he left a marked impression on her – as she said at his retirement dinner in 1991, ‘he has had, through his thinking and writing, a deep effect on me’.<sup>39</sup> But it was through his rebuttal to the Church of England’s condemnation of poverty in inner cities in the 1980s that Jakobovits really showed himself to be an ally of Thatcher. His publication, *From Doom to Hope*, stressed the need for a greater work ethic and emphasis on personal responsibility as the solution to poverty – as he told *The Guardian* in 1988: ‘many people in this country are work-shy. In the Jewish

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<sup>37</sup> Dellheim, “More Estonians than Etonians”, in Pugliese, 252-264.

<sup>38</sup> Young, *One of Us*, 422.

<sup>39</sup> Thatcher speech at dinner to Lord Jakobovits, 21 February 1991, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108261>.

view, work itself enables; if we did more of it we would be competitive and flourishing'.<sup>40</sup>  
In Jakobovits, Thatcher had found what she was missing from the Church of England – a senior religious figure who endorsed the same moral beliefs as hers. It was a relationship she was deeply grateful for and Jakobovits found himself both knighted and elevated to the Lords by the end of the Thatcher's premiership.

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<sup>40</sup> *Guardian*, 29 December 1988.

## PART III: RECEPTION

### Church-State relations

In part, Thatcher's parading of her religious convictions could well have been borne from the fact that her government endured the worst Church-State relationship of the century. In 1981, Runcie came out against the government's British Nationality Bill on the grounds of racial discrimination. The following year, after the success of the Falklands War, Runcie delivered what Thatcher – in her hour of military glory – perceived as a far too neutral sermon at St Paul's, where he prayed for those who fought and died for Britain *and* Argentina (in keeping with the Church's reluctance of equating patriotism and the Church). According to *The Sun*, the incident left Thatcher 'spitting blood'.<sup>1</sup> In 1983, the General Synod of the Church of England formed a working party that came out with a report entitled *The Church and the Bomb* pronounced in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Although the Synod narrowly rejected the report, the episode solidified, in Thatcher's mind, the conviction that the Church was not to be trusted.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the following year the newly appointed David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, criticised the government for refusing to care for the poor with regard to its handling of the miners' strike.

In late 1985, the Church of England launched its most stinging attack on the government's handling of poverty in inner cities in the form of *Faith in the City*. The publication from the *Commission on Urban Priority Areas*, which came to nearly 400 pages, took two years to compile and complete and made twenty-three recommendations to the government. The report – which concluded that the 'nation [is] confronted by a fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Campbell, *Iron Lady*, 390.

<sup>2</sup> *The Church and the Bomb: the general synod debate, February 1983* (London: CIO, 1983).

injustice' – received widespread media coverage (as shall be discussed) and was championed by the *The Church Times*, dominating the December 1985 edition.<sup>3</sup>

Thatcher received the most criticism from the Church in 1988, after her address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The Bishop of Gloucester attacked the speech for highlighting how Thatcher was 'giving only the barest minimum to those in need' and Bishop Michael Hare Duke slammed her 'unsophisticated' approach to theology. Writing in *The Church Times*, Duke wrote, 'she was manifestly an amateur advising professionals, but this did not dent her confidence that scripture was on her side'. He concluded that this came across as 'the laywoman's use of the Bible with a vengeance'.<sup>4</sup> The Nonconformist in Thatcher, however, would probably have enthusiastically endorsed this comment.

### **Christian reactions**

The Church of England was not the only one of the churches to criticise the government openly. The Methodist Church published similar publications to *Faith in the City: Two Nations, One Gospel* (1984), *What Churches Can Do* (1983), and *Gospel from the Poor* (1984), and in 1988 the Methodist Conference openly criticised the Thatcher government for its social divisiveness.<sup>5</sup> Evangelicals, however, had a somewhat more ambivalent stance towards Thatcher. In neither *Evangelicals Now* nor *Evangelical Times* (two of the main evangelical publications of which one of the main contributors was Fred Catherwood, a pro-European Conservative and quiet critic of Thatcher) was there much coverage of Thatcher throughout the eighties.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it was because of the polarising nature of Thatcherism. On the one hand, *Evangelical Times* warned of 'politicians [acting]

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<sup>3</sup> *Church Times*, 6 December 1985.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 1 June 1988; *Church Times*, 27 May 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Bradley, *Marching*, 127-139; Campbell, *Iron Lady*, 390; *The Times*, 2 October 1984; *Faith in the City: A Call for action by Church and State* (London: Church House Publishing, 1986); *Daily Telegraph*, 2 December 1985; Davie, *Believing without Belonging*, 152.

<sup>6</sup> For evidence of Catherwood's criticisms of Thatcher, see his autobiography: Catherwood, Sir Fred, *At the Cutting Edge* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), 153-193.

in a way that brings the gospel into disrepute’, yet on the other, it also praised the way that ‘Mrs Thatcher recently told church leaders and bishops that the church should be doing more to teach morality to the British nation...the general impression seemed to be that this admonition was justified’.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the criticism thrown at Thatcher by the Churches, she still cared deeply about what they thought of her. Whilst Runcie felt the government had abandoned the old left-liberal consensus that had followed the beliefs of William Temple and was enshrined by the welfare state, Thatcher tried to convince the bishops that the her government cared just as much about the poor as Attlee’s or Heath’s had. Her 1988 ‘Sermon on the Mound’ was a direct rebuttal of the claims that her policies lacked compassion and just the year before Clifford Longley noted in *The Times* how Thatcher had invited eight senior bishops to Chequers in an attempt (albeit not a very successful one) to heal the ‘frosty relationship between the government and the Church of England’.<sup>8</sup> The same year she had asked her Private Secretary, Michael Alison (himself, as mentioned previously, a committed Christian) to enact a dialogue with other leading Conservatives who were also Christians in an effort to prove that not only could Christians be Conservatives, but that ideally, they should be.

The result was the fascinating 1990 publication, *Christianity and Conservatism*. In the Appendix it included Thatcher’s complete speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the main body of the book contained an assortment of essays from Conservative politicians (Lord Hailsham, Brian Griffiths, Michael Alison, John Gummer, Timothy Raison) and leading theologians and bishops. The book made two important points, both highlighted by a passage from Brian Griffiths’ essay, “The Conservative Quadrilateral”. Firstly, that ‘if we wish to place present Conservative philosophy in a theological context, then it rests firmly within the Judaeo-Christian tradition’; and secondly, ‘it follows that the

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<sup>7</sup> *Evangelical Times*, June 1983; *Evangelical Times*, April 1988.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, 15 February, 1988.

Churches should respect modern Conservatism as a legitimate political option for Christians'.<sup>9</sup> In short, 'Thatcherism is compatible with Christianity, and the Churches have no right to criticise or question it' was the mantra. And so, as contemporaries noted that the Church of England was no longer the 'Tory Party at Prayer', Thatcher was keen to stress that the Tory Party was still praying. The commissioning of this book, more than anything else in Thatcher's premiership, highlighted the importance Thatcher attached to religion.

Despite her attempts to portray her brand of Conservatism as a Christian one, Thatcher also stressed that it was legitimate for Christians to disagree over politics. As she said in 1988, 'Christians will very often genuinely disagree, though it is a mark of Christian manners that they will do so with courtesy and mutual respect'.<sup>10</sup> Here, she faced severe criticism from other Christian politicians, namely Eric Heffer from the Labour Party and Alan Beith from the Liberals. Heffer (whom the Bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, described as a 'wholehearted champion of the poor') wrote in his book *Why I am a Christian* that: 'I realise that my views will not be popular with everyone. Certainly not with some Conservatives who believe that Christianity should not get mixed up with politics and that the emphasis of the Church should be on personal salvation'. For Heffer, 'Jesus was undoubtedly a revolutionary. He was classified as a subversive by the state functionaries of his day. He wanted to change and improve society and was against oppression of all kinds'.<sup>11</sup> Like Thatcher's, Heffer's religious beliefs were deeply intertwined with his political ones: 'my Christianity and my Socialism are synonymous. The one stems from the

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Alison and David Edwards eds., *Christianity and Conservatism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 217.

<sup>10</sup> Thatcher speech to General Assembly, 21 May 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Heffer, *Why I am a Christian* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 13-15; Beith, Gummer, and Heffer eds., *Faith in Politics: Which Way Should Christians Vote?* (London: SPCK, 1987), 56-58.

other'.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Thatcher, Heffer believed that the Gospels called on men to help improve the lot of those worse off via wealth redistribution.

Alan Beith also criticised Thatcher's government for its 'Erastian concept of a church at the service of the state'. However, Beith, who would later become a Methodist preacher, shared Thatcher's opinion that 'the Christian gospel is based on the principle that God gives men free choice'.<sup>13</sup> In a 1987 publication from the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge entitled *Faith in Politics*, Heffer, Beith and John Selwyn Gummer put forward for each of their parties the justification for Christians voting for them. Thatcher herself recommended the book in an interview for Radio 4 in June 1987, acutely aware that if she preached the doctrine of choice, she had to accept that Christians would be free to disagree with her policies.<sup>14</sup> This was something Tony Blair would later echo when he announced to the Christian Socialist Movement in 2001 that the 'Christian faith should never be the monopoly of any one political party'.<sup>15</sup>

### **Press coverage**

Harold Evans once claimed that the best journalism is 'the first rough draft of history'.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, in large part the obfuscation of religion in the historiography of late twentieth century British politics can be attributed to the general disinterest the press showed towards religion in the period. However, during the 1980s the strange paradox occurred that whilst Thatcher's battle with the Churches (and vice-versa) and her sermons on her religious beliefs received much *coverage*, there was very little *commentary* on the issue at stake. In 1988, *The Times* religious affairs correspondent, Clifford Longley, claimed that

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 19, 95.

<sup>14</sup> Thatcher interview for Radio 4, 6 June 1987, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106646>.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Blair speech to the Christian Socialist Movement, 29 March 2001, BBC News Online.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Tony Geraghty, *The Irish War* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), ix.

‘in Britain the development of social theology is weak and neglected, and what passes for it is often not much more than a sprinkling of holy water over what are essentially secular political prejudices’.<sup>17</sup> This is a useful comment to bear in mind when analysing press reactions to both Thatcher’s own religious beliefs and her relationship with the Churches.

Thatcher’s three key sermons were well covered by the press, though to some extent the amount of coverage which they received merely reflected the importance of her standing politically. Her first speech at the St Lawrence Jewry in 1978 received the least treatment though Clifford Longley still had the foresight to claim that the speech marked the ‘entry of religion into new Conservative politics’.<sup>18</sup> *The Daily Mail* congratulated Thatcher for being a ‘Christian and unashamed’ of the fact and agreed wholeheartedly with her claim that ‘the Devil is still with us’.<sup>19</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*’s coverage featured a picture of Thatcher in the pulpit of the Church and a day later published a synthesised recount of her speech which highlighted her disdain for the ‘moral superiority’ attributed to Socialist and collectivist values. Little more than six weeks later, one of Thatcher’s key perorations on morality and society (previously discussed) was published in the comment section of the paper: ‘The moral basis of a free society’.<sup>20</sup> Even as opposition leader, Thatcher’s first sermon attracted a good deal of media interest.

Her second speech at the Church of the St Lawrence Jewry, after two years in power, received even more attention. *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* all judged Thatcher’s second speech to be front page material, and all provided an accompanying picture. Rather tellingly, however, the focus of the coverage was less on what Thatcher said, and more on the fact that a group of Communists heckled and demonstrated at

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<sup>17</sup> Suzy Powlng ed., *The Times Book of Clifford Longley* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 17 April 1978.

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Mail*, 31 March 1978.

<sup>20</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 March 1978; *Telegraph*, 1 April 1978; *Telegraph*, 16 May 1978.

the start of the sermon.<sup>21</sup> As such, despite the headline coverage and that much of what she said prefigured her 1988 sermon, only the *Telegraph* offered any commentary on the text. On page 18, in its Comment section, under the title ‘Spirit of the nation’ it argued the speech ‘should be seen as [being of] some importance’ as it showed how the ‘depth of Mrs Thatcher’s personal concern for the unemployed [is] now beyond doubt’.<sup>22</sup>

By far the most controversial and widely covered of Thatcher’s religious speeches was the ‘Sermon on the Mound’ address in 1988, where she attempted to identify ‘the distinctive marks of Christianity’ (discussed earlier).<sup>23</sup> While the headline coverage was much the same as in 1981, this time far more emphasis was placed on both the actual content of the speech (the *Daily Telegraph* reprinted the full text on its second page) and reactions to it.<sup>24</sup> The *Telegraph* concurred with Thatcher that ‘a certain disdain for material achievement has been for too long the character of our ruling classes’.<sup>25</sup> The *Daily Mail* highlighted the courage of Thatcher in speaking openly on her beliefs (‘Where angels fear to tread’ was the headline) and praised her for being ‘both a battler and believer’.<sup>26</sup> The lead comment article of *The Times* echoed similar sentiments, and also recognised that ‘the essence of her argument was that Christianity is concerned with spiritual redemption and personal responsibility’.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, not all reactions were positive. Although Clifford Longley argued that the Church of England had ‘no right to patronize’ Mrs Thatcher for voicing her religious beliefs, the bulk of press coverage that followed the ‘Sermon on the Mound’ focused on the negative

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, *The Times*, “Communists heckle Mrs Thatcher in Church”, 5 March 1981; *Daily Mail*, “Uproar in the church”, 5 March 1981; *Guardian*, “Hecklers interrupt Church talk by Thatcher”, 5 March 1981; *Telegraph*, “Thatcher Sermon Delayed”, 5 March 1981.

<sup>22</sup> *Telegraph*, 5 March 1981.

<sup>23</sup> Thatcher speech to the General Assembly, 21 May 1988, CD-ROM or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

<sup>24</sup> *Telegraph*, 23 May 1981.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Mail*, 23 May 1988.

<sup>27</sup> *The Times*, 23 May 1988.

reactions to the sermon.<sup>28</sup> Roy Hattersley claimed that Thatcher's brand of morality was 'unrecognised by most of the population'.<sup>29</sup> In the Commons, Neil Kinnock compared Thatcher to Pontius Pilate, washing her hands of child and other social benefits.<sup>30</sup> And academics, another stalwart of the left-liberal consensus that Thatcherism had broken free of, also criticised the speech; Professor of Divinity at Durham, James DG Dunn, posited the view that Thatcher had failed to realise the theological implications of 'fallenness' (in other words, that human choice is flawed), which for Dunn implied the need for a cap on corporate freedom.<sup>31</sup>

The press also noted the level of discontent amongst religious groups. *The Independent* ran an article on the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Professor Whyte, who criticised the Thatcher government for 'placing too much emphasis on the importance of the individual in society'.<sup>32</sup> In the *New Statesman*, John Robinson, who later became Bishop of Woolwich, argued that 'Christians should be the last people to be found clinging to the wrecks of atomistic individualism, which has no foundation in the Bible'.<sup>33</sup> The *Economist* highlighted the ire and disdain which the speech had evoked amongst the bishops who called it 'simplistic' and 'selective'.<sup>34</sup> And *The Guardian's* religious affairs correspondent, Walter Schwarz, noted how 600 Methodist delegates had voted at their annual conference to inform Mrs Thatcher of their 'sense of outrage at the divisive effects of government policies in widening the gap between rich and poor'.<sup>35</sup>

Rather surprisingly given the dearth of historical literature on the topic, the press was clearly aware of the depth of Mrs Thatcher's religious convictions. Clifford Longley noted

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<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 6 June 1988.

<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 24 May 1988.

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*, 25 May 1988.

<sup>31</sup> *Guardian*, 1 June 1988.

<sup>32</sup> *Independent*, 18 February 1988.

<sup>33</sup> *New Statesman*, "Pauline conversions and inversions", 3 June 1988, 15.

<sup>34</sup> *Economist*, "Politics and morality: Caesar talks back", 28 May 1988, 31-34.

<sup>35</sup> *Guardian*, 28 June 1988.

that she was, 'by all accounts the most theologically minded Prime Minister this century'.<sup>36</sup> *The Guardian* and *The Times* reported Thatcher's 'fury' in the Commons on being likened to Pontius Pilate by Kinnock and her retort that he was 'debasing what she believed'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the *Mail* noted that she was 'a Christian and unashamed'. The *Telegraph* noted that her sermons were 'genuine', and the *Economist* that 'she is fascinated by theology, and well-versed in Christian teaching'.<sup>38</sup> Her close relations with the Chief Rabbi and the Jewish faith were also noted, especially during her 1986 visit to Israel, when the *Guardian* described her as an 'honorary Jew' (*sic*).<sup>39</sup> Perhaps because Thatcher was careful to avoid claiming she took any direct political teachings from the Bible (as Blair seemed to do in 2006 – page 5), no newspaper questioned at any great length the implications of a theologically minded and religious Prime Minister.

Paradoxically, the press covered in depth the reactions from theologians and the Churches' towards Thatcher, but ostensibly, it did not feel it was in any position to pass judgement on Thatcher's religious beliefs. This reluctance to offer any sustained commentary on Thatcher's faith could have been borne out of two factors. Firstly, recalling Longley's comment on the weakness of social theology in Britain, the aforementioned lack of any real clashes between the Church and State throughout the twentieth century in Britain may have left the press ill-equipped to deal with the coverage of events in the eighties. And secondly, whilst it is clear that the key religious affairs correspondents of the time – Walter Schwarz and Clifford Longley – felt the 1980s was a seminal period in Church-State relations (pages 48-49), perhaps their editors were less inclined to stir up religious debate and controversy, something they were neither used to, nor aware of how this would be received by their readership. As Bernard Ingham commented on the issue: 'the press are

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<sup>36</sup> *The Times*, 6 June 1988.

<sup>37</sup> *Guardian*, 25 May 1988; *The Times*, 25 May 1988.

<sup>38</sup> *Daily Mail*, 31 March 1978; *Telegraph*, 5 March 1981; *Economist*, "Politics and Morality", 28 May 1988, 31-34.

<sup>39</sup> *Guardian*, 27 May 1986.

only interested in two things – conflict as distinct from harmony, and commerce’.<sup>40</sup> Certainly the former would seem to fit in with the coverage of Thatcher’s religious pronouncements in the press; they were only ever main news when she was seen to be conflicting with a particular body, usually the Church of England.

Similarly, little historical analysis has been undertaken on the deteriorating Church-State relations that took place in the 1980s, despite the fact that the newspapers were replete with stories and articles highlighting the decaying relationship. As early as January 1983, Raphael Samuel had drawn attention to the fraying connection between the two in his article in the *New Statesman*, ‘The Tory Party at Prayer’. There, Samuel argued that Thatcher had broken free from the old Conservative and Church of England alliance that used to be enshrined in the Tory cry of ‘Throne and altar’ during the reign of Queen Anne, and that she now offered her own theology, with a ‘potent appeal in its simplicity and simple definition between right and wrong, good and bad’. Furthermore, Samuel argued that she had turned away from the Disraelian belief that the Church was ‘best for evangelising the masses’, as she now had *The Sun* to do the same job (although, as has been shown, Thatcher displayed a deep and repeated concern for the Churches to fulfil what she saw as their duty to provide moral guidance to the nation).<sup>41</sup> The following year, at the height of the controversy over the Bishop of Durham’s condemnation of the government’s handling of the miners’ strike, the *Economist* ran an article that succinctly argued that ‘the church has long ceased to be the Tory party at prayer’.<sup>42</sup> In October 1984 Peter Jenkins wrote how ‘the Church, proverbially the Tory party at prayer, has queried the moral credentials of Thatcherism’.<sup>43</sup> A few months later Martyn Halsall wrote in the *Guardian* that ‘nowhere have church and politics collided

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<sup>40</sup> Personal interview with Bernard Ingham, 18 December 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Raphael Samuel, ‘The Tory Party at Prayer’, *New Statesman*, 28 January 1983.

<sup>42</sup> *Economist*, 29 September 1984.

<sup>43</sup> *Guardian*, 10 October 1984.

more ferociously than in the Church of England'.<sup>44</sup> And the 1985 *Faith in the City* report by the Church's Commission on Urban Priority Areas prompted a reluctant Runcie to tell Walter Schwarz: 'I'm not a very political animal...so it is somewhat dutifully that I have entered into this question, the problems of the inner city'.<sup>45</sup>

Further disagreements over church schools caused a tense relationship in 1987, especially when the Church accused the government of 'starving church schools...into deep depression, low morale and appalling conditions'.<sup>46</sup> And in 1989 the *Guardian* noted the efforts of Conservative MP Hal Miller, who moved a Commons motion calling 'on the churches to fulfil their role promoting moral values', on the basis that the growing perception was 'that the Church spoke with a great deal of certainty in the realm of politics, but increasing uncertainty on things of the spirit'.<sup>47</sup> Miller's motion highlighted the discomfort many people felt with the Church's criticism of the government in the 1980s, something it had not done throughout the course of the twentieth century.

Again, it is clear that the relationship between Church and State received much press coverage in the Thatcher era, but the question remains as to why it has been essentially forgotten in histories of the period. Curiously, in 1989 the *Guardian's* religious affairs correspondent Walter Schwarz released a book entitled, 'The New Dissenters: The Nonconformist conscience in the age of Thatcher'. Schwarz argued that there were 'solid indicators' that 'Mrs Thatcher [had] created a Nonconformist Conscience against her, uniting the churches and high-minded non-believers in a grand moral alliance'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in 1991, *The Times's* Clifford Longley released a book covering his period as religious affairs correspondent of the paper. Longley argued that, 'the "Thatcher versus the Church" story

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<sup>44</sup> *Guardian*, 23 February 1985.

<sup>45</sup> *Guardian*, 3 December 1985.

<sup>46</sup> *The Times*, 14 May 1987.

<sup>47</sup> *Guardian*, 14 February 1989.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Schwarz, *The New Dissenters: The Nonconformist Conscience in the Age of Thatcher* (London: Bedford Square Press, 1989), 1.

was a constant theme of the 1980s...[and] will go on being fertile material for analysts long after the 1970s, possibly the 1990s, are forgotten'.<sup>49</sup>

So far, however, this has not been the case. Indeed, revealingly, no histories of the British press offer any insights into the nature of media coverage of religious issues during Thatcher's career.<sup>50</sup> This again, is another issue which historians have chosen to ignore. Perhaps the answer lies in the sheer magnitude of Thatcher's imprint on British politics – given the great political and socio-economic changes of the period, religion has not been high on the list of historians' priorities.

Tellingly, by the time of Thatcher's resignation no newspaper, when reflecting on her premiership, mentioned either her faith or her sermons. The best that any came up with was the *Independent*: 'her ideological ground was so deeply prepared, and so deeply sunk into her spirit'.<sup>51</sup> Instead, the epitaphs on Thatcher's time in power focused on the economy, Falklands, the miners and Europe. Seemingly, there was no time or space to mention religion.

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<sup>49</sup> Powling, *Times Book of Clifford Longley*, xiv.

<sup>50</sup> See for example, Ralph Negrine, *Politics and the Mass Media in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1989); Colin Seymour-Ure, *The British Press and Broadcasting since 1945 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London: Fontana Press, 1990); William Shawcross, *Rupert Murdoch: Ringmaster of the Information Circus* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).

<sup>51</sup> *Independent*, 23 November 1990.

## CONCLUSION

### Thatcher in the pulpit

In late 1988, Thatcher told David Frost: 'I am very weary of talking about personal belief, because it could be so easily misinterpreted'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps said in reaction to the outburst of ill-feeling directed at her sermon to General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, this was nonetheless a strange comment, given she had done quite the opposite during the majority of her time as leader of the Conservative party. With remarkable confidence, not only did Thatcher openly offer her interpretation of scripture in sermons, speeches and interviews – she even directly challenged orthodox Christian teachings. As Jonathan Raban highlighted, what made Thatcher's religious speeches all the more impressive was the extent to which she had near total control over their creation: constantly working with speechwriters, as opposed to merely using their work.<sup>2</sup> In essence, what Thatcher said was what she genuinely believed. And given the decline in religious belief in Britain in the 1980s, it seems even more surprising that Thatcher went to the extent that she did to put across her religious beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

Though Thatcher was keen to stress that the Bible did not offer any direct political teachings, for her, it very clearly offered moral principles that politics had to adhere to. Inspired by the stern Victorian values of self-help and the doctrinal liberalism of her father, Thatcher's faith focussed around two central moral precepts. Firstly, personal responsibility: that each individual must take responsibility for their own actions and well-being, but also care for those less fortunate. And secondly, freedom of choice: that God had given each

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<sup>1</sup> Thatcher interview with David Frost, 30 December 1988, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107022>.

<sup>2</sup> Raban, *God, Man & Mrs Thatcher*, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> From the 1980s to the 1990s, disbelief in God increased from 18 percent of the population, to 27 percent. A.H. Halsey, *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends*, (London: Macmillan, 2000), 663.

individual the power to make their own choices. In a political sense, one could suggest that the overhaul of the liberal, welfare state consensus which pushed the onus away from the state and onto the individual, and the emphasis on the voluntary sector for welfare provision, was the logical embodiment of ‘personal responsibility’ in a political context.<sup>4</sup> In terms of freedom of choice, Thatcher’s attacks on the Church of England were, in essence, caused by her belief that the Church was impinging on freedom of choice – effectively championing one brand of politics over another.

### **A reappraisal**

Symptomatic of the historians’ neglect of religion, the few analyses of the nature of Thatcher’s religious beliefs have been somewhat off the mark. Alfred Roberts’ sermon notes, as seen in Chapter 1, suggest a rather different form of religious belief from what Campbell describes as being ‘fundamentalist’, ‘Bible-based’, and focussed on ‘personal salvation’.<sup>5</sup> In fact, instead of being ‘Bible-based’, Roberts’ sermons took from a wide range of predominantly lay sources. This matters precisely because Campbell’s other significant argument – that Thatcher was less close to her father than she claimed – is flawed, because it places too great a weight on spatial rather than emotional distance. Whilst Thatcher may have distanced herself from Grantham once she had moved to the South (though she did return infrequently), the constant references to her father in interviews, speeches and her memoirs suggest that even if the nature of the filial bond was aggrandised, it was nonetheless significant.

Evidence of this is shown by the nature of Thatcher’s religious beliefs. Just as her father was doctrinally liberal, an ecumenist interested in personal responsibility, so was she.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1981 Thatcher stated that she believed the voluntary sector to be ‘at the heart of all our social welfare provision’. Thatcher speech to Women’s Voluntary Service National Conference, 19 January 1981, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104551>.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, *Grocer’s Daughter*, 16; Young, *One of Us*, 419.

Thatcher infused her religious beliefs with a litany of lay as well as theological literature; she felt comfortable switching from the Wesleyan Methodist Church to the Church of England; and one of the defining principles of Thatcherism – individualism – was borne directly from her Christian belief in personal responsibility. Similarly, Hugo Young’s claim that Thatcher was ‘evangelical in persuasion’ does not stand up to scrutiny.<sup>6</sup> She may have been evangelical in *character* – often embracing a fiercely dichotomous world view – but her real Biblical interest lay in the Old Testament (epitomised by her close relationship with Jakobovits), and she divided evangelical opinion in Britain.<sup>7</sup>

Further research still needs to be made into Thatcher’s religious beliefs. Firstly, with respect to her father, a more detailed analysis must be undertaken of his background if one is to either refute or support Hennessey’s claim that ‘the country was ruled from beyond the grave by Alderman Roberts’.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, a more sustained analysis of Thatcher’s faith – namely how it changed over time and the influences upon it – would provide a far more nuanced overview of her beliefs than this paper could hope to give. Her time at Oxford University would undoubtedly be of great interest to any scholar of the subject. For example, according to Campbell she actively took part in the Wesley Society’s trips to local villages where she often preached in church halls. One onlooker apparently described her sermon on ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God’ as ‘outstanding’.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, given the consistency of Thatcher’s opinions in social, economic and moral terms, one would expect to find that her religious beliefs did not change much either (accepting her denominational change to have been non-ideological), confirming Green’s belief that: ‘Thatcher seems never to have thought it necessary to change herself or her views’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Young, *One of Us*, 419.

<sup>7</sup> *Sunday Times*, 22 May 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Campbell, *Grocer’s Daughter*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Green, *Thatcher*, 197.

The findings of this paper hopefully highlight the need for a rethink into the significance of religion in modern British politics. Though great care must be taken to avoid overstating the role religious ideology played in political decision making, this does not mean that the practice should be avoided. For instance, one could plausibly investigate the extent to which the Church's backlash against Thatcher's policies, that led to the *Faith in the City* report of 1985, caused her to promote inner cities to the top her political agenda in her third term in office, announcing after her third election victory: 'To give back heart to our cities we must give back hope to the people'.<sup>11</sup>

Extended research also needs to be undertaken into all of the religious beliefs of Prime Ministers since the sixties. On the basis of the evidence uncovered during this paper, one could (tentatively) make the claim that the Nonconformist heritage – and Christian values in general – have been massively underrepresented in accounts of British political leaders. Consequently, this would bring us to question the broader assumption that the onset of secularisation has meant that religion no longer plays a part in politics.

Whilst this paper has focussed primarily on Thatcher's personal faith, the very nature of it has meant that attention has also shifted to the Church-State relationship of the eighties, another neglected historical topic. Not only did the eighties mark the nadir in Church-State relations in the twentieth century, but also the established Church subsequently took over the role left void by the infighting Labour party as the champion of the underprivileged, turning on its head the orthodoxy on relations between the Church and British government.

The media and press have similarly received little historical attention, particularly with reference to religious affairs. Though the difficulties between the established Church and the government were frequently documented amongst the broadsheets, at the time of Thatcher's departure from office, no newspaper even mentioned them. Remembering Harold

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Thatcher speech to Conservative Party Conference, 9 October 1987, *CD-ROM* or <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106941>.

Evans' claim, the lack of any mention of religion in modern histories of the press in Britain could in part explain the lack of historical work on the issue. It would not be surprising if research on the subject found that the declining coverage of religious affairs in the British press is inextricably linked with the way journalists perceive the importance of Christianity in British society.

Though the focus of this paper has been on Christianity, Thatcher's relationship with the Jewish faith has also received mention. Though Charles Dellheim's work has made good progress enquiring into the nature of Thatcher's relationship with Judaism, more work needs to be done on the subject, particularly her rapport with Jakobovits, the Jewish residents of Finchley and the Israeli state.<sup>12</sup> Such research would be well placed within the context of Martin Gilbert's work on Churchill and Judaism.<sup>13</sup>

Central amongst all of this is ascertaining why there is such a poverty of literature on religion and politics in Britain. The issue of religious fundamentalism has been one that political commentators and historians have not shied away from, yet curiously, moderate religious belief seems of little interest. It could be that most of these historians accept the secularisation thesis, and have followed it to its logical conclusion – if religion stopped mattering in the sixties, it should therefore not matter in the 1990s. Or perhaps what has occurred is what social scientists call a 'spiral of silence' – that the lack of historical literature on religion and politics in modern British history has in fact perpetuated the lack of literature on the subject. Either way, a radical reappraisal of the relationship between the two is long overdue.

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<sup>12</sup> Dellheim, "More Estonians than Etonians".

<sup>13</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

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