

Cults, Martyrs and Good Samaritans

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Religion in Contemporary
English Political Discourse

James Crossley

PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2018 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3829 3	Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3828 6	Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0309 2	PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0311 5	Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0310 8	EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

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Introduction

At the time of writing, there is not yet a political position that has dominated English political discourse after the 2007/8 economic crisis. In other words, we do not know the settled, long-term successor to Thatcherite neoliberalism. We may still be in the midst of the chaos before the new settlement emerges. Or we might be at the beginning of a state of semi-permanent chaos and contradiction. Or we might be in for an intensified version of what came before. Or perhaps there is an impending catastrophe which will then open up a reordering of the world; as Slavoj Žižek put it, 'the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction'.¹ Whatever might happen in the future, this book is a history, a retrospective look at the different options that emerged, and were vying for dominance, in the midst of the post-2008 crisis of capitalism. But more specifically still, this book is a look at how ideas and assumptions about 'religion' and commonly related language about, for instance, Christianity, the Bible and Islam, were tied up with, and typically provided an authority for, dominant ideological shifts in English political discourse with particular reference to changes since the financial crash. Before we move on to such ideas, there is the inevitable question of definitions. And definitions relating to 'religion' can be especially slippery.

What 'religion' means

If we want to know about how and why religion has been used in contemporary politics we could begin with the difficult, seemingly preliminary question of definition: 'What is religion?' This is, of course, a loaded question. Any attempt at defining 'religion' might immediately lead to debates or confusion over inclusion (are yoga and football 'religions' or are their participants behaving in a 'religious' manner?) or it might introduce concepts that are too broad to be analytically useful (is that which gives meaning to life somehow 'religious' or 'religion?'). What I want to do is to avoid coming at the question from such debatable angles. This is not to dismiss the importance of all issues associated with the critical study of religion (e.g., ritual, sacred, profane, symbolism, meaning) but rather

I want to select a particular focus of study, in this case one which looks at how and why language popularly assumed to be about, or related to, 'religion' has been used. In other words, the approach to the critical study of religion which suits my interests and purposes is that which works at the level of discourse and ideology, and with a materialist grounding.² Put yet another way, the initial question could now be reformulated: 'What do people mean when they talk, write or make assumptions about "religion" and terms commonly associated with such language (e.g., Christianity, Muslim, sect, cult, God, gods, martyr, Bible, etc.)?' This will mean that I will not be providing an external, fixed definition of 'religion' other than working with popularly assumed definitions, nor assessing truth claims by insiders, nor deciding whether a given tradition is 'really about' peace or violence, nor making judgements about what 'true' or 'false' Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or religion might be. Instead, I am looking at how such language popularly understood has been used to legitimate the development of, maintenance of, or opposition to various ideological positions or social formations in English political discourse. This does not necessarily mean that politicians, journalists or activists necessarily identified as 'religious' or 'Christian' when they (say) alluded to the Bible, or indeed that they necessarily knew that they were alluding to a biblical text. Whether people consciously used such language or not, and whether they consciously used language in a way identified as 'religious' or not, is in many ways irrelevant because we can still see how meanings changed over time irrespective of the intentions of speakers and authors. After all, we all use words and phrases that are sometimes uncritically and unthinkingly inherited from our cultural contexts, and language associated with 'religion' is but one example.

It may have been noticed that the examples of 'religious' language I chose above are popular examples associated with Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The main reason for this is because of my choice of 'English political discourse' as the area of focus. In parliamentary politics, Christianity has historically been the dominant reference point until the late 1980s (especially after the Salman Rushdie affair) and 9/11 when Islam and Muslims (typically understood in connection with an Oriental religiosity) became the object of even more intense scrutiny. Despite the recurrence of issues relating to antisemitism, Judaism constructed in terms of 'religion' has not been as prominent in English political discourse post-Thatcher, with the emphasis far more likely to be on more contentious racial issues and has thus been used in such a way in an attempt to

critique the Labour Left on the issues of Palestine, Israel and Zionism. Non-Christian, non-Muslim and non-Jewish viewpoints have not been entirely absent in English political discourse either. Occasionally, they are present but part of my choice of subjects (alongside the limits of my expertise) involved covering language most associated with Christianity, Islam and to lesser extent Judaism because of the sort of language foregrounded in parliamentary politics.

As this indicates, the reasons for the prominence of Islam and Muslims in English political discourse is obvious enough, and we will turn to further reasons behind such interests throughout this book. Reasons for Christianity being prominent may not be as well known, but they are relatively straightforward. While some explanations are as simple as Christianity being central in a politician's life (so, for example, Tony Blair) or upbringing (so, for example, Theresa May), there are broader historic reasons and inherited language, whether involving bishops in the House of Lords, vestiges of Conservative Anglicanism or Liberal Non-conformity, Thatcher's courting of a morally conservative Christianity, or the emotive role of Nonconformist, Catholic and Jewish traditions in the foundation and development of the Labour Party and trade union movement. While there is no serious Christian vote of the sort that might swing an election, politicians remain wary of isolating a denominational vote or pressure groups and so a well-placed allusion or even bill amendment could still potentially keep such people onside.³ These are also the sorts of 'religious' traditions that might play well with the press, particularly the right-wing media, and earn a favourable headline. But the perception of *too much* Christianity (e.g., details of doctrine, practices deemed culturally odd, illiberal views) or inauthenticity means that, for a politician, much care needs to be exercised. We will see in Chapter 4 that there is some evidence that 'too much' religion was off-putting to certain voters in certain parts of the country. Nevertheless, the historic, political and cultural backgrounds and contexts means that Christianity and the Bible has functioned as (an often implicit) justification for any given political position on economics, foreign policy, social change, race, gender or sexuality, or parliamentary democracy more generally. What Erin Runions calls 'theodemocracy' with particular reference to American political discourse can be applied to English political discourse, even if it has been less overt.⁴

Similar points can be made about the choice of 'English political discourse'. Again, decisions always have to be made by a historian or

interpreter and this often reflects areas of taste, interest and expertise. By 'English political discourse' I am primarily referring to the kinds of debates present in mainstream parliamentary politics, national media engagement, and their relationship with the electorate. Other ways of looking at notions of religion and politics might be to look at, for instance, pronouncements by the Church of England, a public theologian, a representative of a given tradition, or even the ways in which Christians pray or read the Bible in Parliament away from the public gaze. While these voices will not be ignored entirely (and they already receive much attention from theologians), and while I make no claims about what is a valid and invalid choice of study, I will keep the focus connected more with politicians, parties, newspapers, voter interests, pressure groups, and political or ideological histories, if only because this (in conjunction with the study of religion) is an under-investigated area, albeit one that seems to be growing.⁵

The choice of 'English', while doubtlessly reflecting my own biases and upbringing, is deliberate in the sense that 'British' (for instance) would require a bigger and different book. Religion in each of the non-English nations of the British Isles involves specific cultural and historical issues which are not significantly present in English-based politics (just think what 'religion' means in Belfast and Glasgow, for instance). Nevertheless, this is not to narrow down what should and should not be deemed 'English' for which I deliberately give no fixed definition beyond political discourses taking place in, or having connection with, England, Parliament and the home and primary audience of the English-based media. White voices in political discourses might be represented at the expense of others because of the demographics and interests of Parliament and journalism but in analysing English political discourse I hope to show how and why religion, ethnicity and nationalism are constructed, which in turn ought to show how stable, unstable, historically contingent and ideologically loaded such dominant constructions can be rather than merely replicating such discrimination.

Chronological starting points and subjects of study are also choices any historian has to make. My choices about the ways religion and related language have been understood are framed around major social, economic and ideological changes over the past 50 years, particularly the emergence, acceptance and crises of neoliberalism. More precisely, the bulk of this book will involve looking at the kinds of options that were available roughly between the two General Elections in 2015 and 2017,

though generated by the crisis of 2007/8. While I focus on expected figures of recent years (e.g., party leaders), there is no reason why any other aspect of culture should not be brought in to illuminate historical changes, something I indeed do in this book (whether Monty Python, Barrovians, or fighters in northern Syria). Both the alien and the familiar, not to mention the unacknowledged, will always tell us something about a given time and context, no matter how we value them. No doubt other examples could have been chosen but those discussed in this book provide insight into some of the most notable shifts in the ways religion and related terms were constructed from the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, through the Brexit vote, and up to the 2017 General Election, though Chapter 1 will provide contextualisation in terms of post-1960s political discourse. To use an exaggerated analogy from the Bible or Christopher Hill (whichever you prefer), the post-2008 world is a world at least partially turned upside down and has thrown up a range of different ideological options, the long-term consequences of which we may not know for years, and the fate of some of these options may become long forgotten or morph into something quite different.

This book: from chaos to...?

In this book, I continue investigating my interests in the ways sustained social, political and economic upheaval can generate a range of contradictory ideas (including those relating to religion) from radical egalitarianism to reactionary nationalism, as well as their (often unintended) longer-term consequences. There is always subjective judgement involved in delineating what counts as such upheaval, but I think some relatively uncontroversial comments can be made. Changes in economic accumulation and social attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s generated a range of seemingly contradictory ideological reactions but, out of the chaos, the Thatcherite, neoliberal economic settlement in English political discourse (and, of course, beyond) emerged dominant and replaced the state-interventionist or Keynesian post-war settlement. Over the following decades, neoliberalism became accepted or assumed in mainstream English political discourse (e.g., Parliament, national media), though not without its challenges, differences, tweaks and qualifications. However, since the financial crash, the dominance of neoliberalism in English political discourse (and, of course, beyond) has been challenged like never before, with ideological reactions or political

options ranging from intensification of neoliberalism (e.g., David Cameron's governments), through toying with nativism or ethnonationalism (e.g., EDL, UKIP, Theresa May), to bringing back socialism to mainstream politics (e.g., Jeremy Corbyn, Momentum).

What is particularly distinctive about this book is, of course, that I am looking at these changes through political assumptions about 'religion' and related terms. In one sense, the contemporary interest in Islam and Muslims shows how ideas relating to religion are common in English political discourse. But in another sense, a focus on religion might seem unusual. For a start, religion is not a regular feature of everyday political rhetoric. To some people based in, or familiar with, certain parts of England and English politics, this might seem a peculiar thing to do because we are not, to put it one way, dealing with American political discourse. Nevertheless, perspective is everything. When I have given papers on such topics at conferences, I am used to the surprise at the discovery of the amount of religious rhetoric in English political discourse. However, an Australian academic at one such conference, who had recently moved to the UK, said to me that he could not believe 'how religious' the UK is, and cited nativity plays and school hymns as evidence. Though this might have been obvious to someone coming from Australia, in some ways this was a surprise to me having been born and raised in the UK and, more specifically, in a town (Barrow-in-Furness) where I have never perceived religion to be foregrounded in public life. But I also grew up with nativity plays and school hymns and, like others, I could mime to hymns, deliberately insert the wrong words, try not to laugh at old-fashioned turns of phrase, and barely pay attention in moralistic assemblies illuminating biblical stories without remembering that something thoroughgoingly 'religious' had been happening in my life. On the other hand, it is hardly a stretch to think people might classify as 'religious' stories of angels, saviours and a virgin birth, or hymns about a lord of the dance, pilgrims and Christian soldiers, and that some might even have paid greater attention to the theological and ethical content. In this sense, we could reapply to notions of religion in state education from Matthew Engelke's argument (borrowing from notions of ambient music and ambient media) about the Bible Society's allusive, sensory and background promotional work which allows for engagement, ignoring or apathy, and works with a theology of choice.⁶ Alternatively, given the cultural heritage of the UK, we think of Christianity at state schools (and even private and public schools) as having a

ghostly presence, something that might once have struck fear, and may still do, but has now become an even paler imitation of its former self.

We can say similar things about Christianity and religion in English political discourse, an issue that will be taken up with a different emphasis in Chapter 4. Certainly, a political leader does not need to identify as Christian as every American president between Carter and Trump has done. Nevertheless, an observer or insider might see or hear in the Houses of Parliament inscribed quotations from the Bible, opening prayers, and a contingent of bishops in the Lords. Perhaps more significant for our purposes is that Thatcher explicitly and repeatedly used the Bible and her Methodist past to authorise Thatcherism-in-the-making and virtually all mainstream politicians since have likewise invoked notions of religion to support their agendas, or at least to try placating a certain type of voter or lobbyist, or even to satisfy their own conscience. Such invocations of Christianity have certainly been subtler than in America, but they have likewise been a constant feature of English political discourse.

In this sense, this book is part of an ongoing attempt to show why and how politicians construct the language associated with religion as part of the many ways the assumed meanings of language change, in this instance how they change in relation to the legitimisation of different ideological positions and shifting social formations across Right, Left and Centre of English political discourse. To give a more precise summary, Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of the changing uses of such language since the 1970s, through the Thatcher-Blair settlement to the challenges to the parliamentary consensus thrown up by the 2007/8 crisis. This introductory summary will cover some old ground for those familiar with previously published work, but it is essential for setting the scene for the rest of the book, and particularly so for those unfamiliar with such research.

Picking up on the ideological options thrown up by the financial crash, Chapter 2 studies the political constructions of religion, the Bible, Christianity and Islam in English parliamentary political discourse by the time of the 2017 General Election, and compares them with their predecessors to see what impact issues like Brexit have had. The starting point will be their Christmas messages, which provide a convenient point of contrast with what came before, but then we will move out to broader constructions of religion. The most notable developments were a shift towards soft ethnonationalist understandings of Christmas, economically protectionist readings of religion, overtly socialist constructions of

Christianity and the Bible, and the ongoing influence of socially liberal assumptions about what religion should (and should not) be, particularly with reference to sexuality.

Chapter 3 delves deeper into ethnonationalist understandings of Christianity and Christians in relation to Islam and Muslims, particularly on the post-2008 far right (e.g., EDL) and their dismissal of the idea popular in mainstream political discourse that ISIS and al Qaeda are a 'perversion of Islam'. Having looked at thousands of comments among far-right groups online, it is overwhelmingly clear that Islam *per se* was deemed the problem and that, occasionally, Christianity and the Bible functioned as a kind of ethnic and 'liberal' marker over against Islam and Muslims (and 'Asians'). This was not the sort of thing that could be overtly embraced in mainstream politics. Nevertheless, certain far-right ideas were reflected in parts of mainstream political discourse by, seemingly paradoxically, professing disdain for the far right and qualifying statements by using the language of a 'perversion of Islam'. This was done partly to obfuscate complicity in problematic issues of class and foreign policy.

Chapter 4 investigates whether the different constructions of religion (and related terms) had wider traction among voters in light of the EU Referendum. This study involved a series of interviews in a so-called 'Brexit town', Barrow-in-Furness, in the aftermath of the Brexit result in the summer of 2016, along with reference to similar and dissimilar locations in England. As with reasoning for Leave and Remain in elite discourse, the answers were complex but there was an overwhelming puzzlement about, and rejection of, politicians referring to religion, Christianity or the Bible. There was no evidence of widespread dislike of religion, Christianity or the Bible, and there was a view that the Bible and Christianity represent basically good moral positions. However, there was constant disdain for politicians distorting or using religion and the Bible for their own ends and a common view that religion does not really have a place in political discourse. In this respect, it reflected an intense hatred of politicians in post-industrial contexts, with some exceptions (including, interestingly, Corbyn). Nevertheless, a minority of people repeated the clichés about Islam and Muslims, particularly found among the far right, despite Barrow having low levels of immigration and 0.2 per cent identifying as Muslim (and falling).

Developing notions of propaganda and mass media, Chapter 5 shifts to the crises of the liberal centre thrown up by Corbyn and Corbynism

with particular reference to the reporting in the *Guardian*. The language of ‘sect’, ‘cult’, ‘fundamentalism’, ‘puritanical’, and so on was repeatedly employed to denote a deviation from the assumed notion of a pure ‘church’ or ‘religion’ representing the neoliberal settlement, while occasionally ‘religion’ or ‘religious’ could be used to denote the alleged irrationality of Corbynism. This was part of a long liberal tradition of constructing ‘fanatical’ anti-capitalist or illiberal Others. However, Corbyn’s stronger showing in the election than (the *Guardian*) expected opened up space for some of the language of deviation to be dropped, modified, reapplied, or even embraced as the press struggled to come to terms with how to reconceptualise Corbynism.

Chapter 6 looks at developments relating to, and contextualising, younger extra-parliamentary leftists who have emerged with, and through social media have helped promote, the Corbynism and one revolutionary cause in particular which has risen to prominence in leftist political discourse in our period: Rojava. The focus in this chapter is on a Corbyn-supporting group largely from the British Isles who were (and some may still be) active in northern Syria and on English-based social media. They have gone by the name of the Bob Crow Brigade and they controversially brought notions of martyrdom (including gendered notions of martyrdom) relating to physical death for the socialist and feminist cause into English political discourse, as well as rethinking notions of political ‘miracle’ and revolutionary ‘faith’.