Crossley, James G. "We're All Individuals': When Life of Brian Collided with Thatcherism." *Harnessing Chaos: The Bible in English Political Discourse Since 1968*. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014. 129–152. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567659347.ch-005>>.

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Chapter 5

‘WE’RE ALL INDIVIDUALS’: WHEN LIFE OF BRIAN COLLIDED WITH THATCHERISM*

1. Satire, Comedy, and Freedom

As David Harvey has shown, as part of the cultural shift towards neoliberalism in the 1960s and 1970s, the rhetoric of freedom, liberty, and individualism could be constructed in opposition to ‘the stifling bureaucratic ineptitude of the state apparatus and oppressive trade union power’.¹ This rhetoric would manifest itself in a range of seemingly contradictory ways but, despite sharp differences and interests, the developing neoliberal consensus would harness some of the key similarities. On the one hand, Margaret Thatcher and her circle were pushing for radical economic change and challenging and reconfiguring traditional upper-class dominance and consensual politics, eventually paving the way for a new dominant class of sometimes provocative entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the youth movements, pop culture, and political satirists would mock politicians, the upper classes, the British class system, and union bureaucracy, and even provide a cultural and leisure resource for the new entrepreneurs. This attitude, Harvey added, would ground the later radicalism of the ‘postmodern turn’ and the scepticism would ‘prepare the way for the suspicion of all metanarratives’.² The so-called ‘Satire Boom’ of the early 1960s would lead to some of the most significant examples of twentieth-century English antiestablishment comedy. It produced figures such as Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller, Alan Bennett, David Frost, John Bird, and John Fortune, and more collective ventures such as the TV programme *That Was the*

* For earlier thoughts on *Life of Brian* and its uses of the Bible in the context of intellectual developments in the 1970s, see J.G. Crossley, ‘Life of Brian or Life of Jesus? Uses of Critical Biblical Scholarship and Non-orthodox Views of Jesus in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*’, *Relegere* (2011), pp. 95-116. For discussion of issues surrounding this, I would like to express my gratitude to Deane Galbraith

1. Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, p. 57.

2. Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, p. 51; see also p. 31.

Week That Was, the magazine *Private Eye*, and the increasing prominence of the more historic Cambridge Footlights club. Among the most internationally famous and enduring products of this period in terms of combining satire, comedy, youthful enthusiasm and iconic pop cultural status was Monty Python (Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin).

Monty Python's most famous and enduring legacy has, of course, been *Life of Brian* (dir. Terry Jones, 1979).³ It is of some significance that the film was released in the same year that Thatcher was coming to power. Certainly, the secular humanism and morality underpinning *Life of Brian* would have been sharply at odds with Thatcher's own beliefs on a number of key issues. Likewise, the stance of Monty Python is hardly conservative or Conservative while *Life of Brian* itself, at times, borders on the anarchistic. Individually, Michael Palin would identify as a traditional Labour supporter while John Cleese was a prominent supporter of the SDP–Liberal Alliance in the 1980s and the Liberal Democrats in the 1990s, though Cleese's liberalism was open to certain Conservative views on entrepreneurship and defence.⁴ Having said that, and no matter how perversely the presumably sometimes unintended overlaps were, some of the most memorable features of the satire in *Life of Brian* picked up on attacks that were associated with Thatcher. Indeed, Terry Jones could still make a loose comical connection between Jesus and Thatcher: 'My feelings towards Christ are that he was a bloody good bloke, even though he wasn't as funny as Margaret Thatcher'.⁵

More precisely, though, the film clearly satirises (as Cleese did for the SDP–Liberal Alliance) trade union and revolutionary leftist and Marxist groups in its portrayal of the wildly ineffective and overly bureaucratic People's Front of Judea, even if (unlike Thatcher) there was some lament over misguided focus and a loss of ideals. The British establishment and class system are implicitly satirised, whether through the strict Latin teacher, market traders, the tortured liberal crucifixion official, or the incompetent ruling classes and imperial administrators. But the anti-establishment satire has its limits, particularly in the case of imperialism,

3. All references to *Life of Brian* are from Monty Python, *The Life of Brian Screenplay* (London: Methuen, 2001). Page references to the screenplay will be included within parentheses in the main text.

4. H. Lacey, 'Python with no venom: Michael Palin profile', *Independent* (August 31, 1997). Cleese's party political broadcasts are available on YouTube. E.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKp7HDv01hk> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gv4Abt3sZU>.

5. Quoted in R. Sellers, *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life: The Inside Story of HandMade Films* (London: John Blake, 2003), p. 5.

such as when the revolutionary Reg partly unintentionally listed its (not entirely historically accurate) benefits in his famous 'What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us' speech. As Philip Davies pointed out, 'The British...and especially the public-school class from which Monty Python comes, are content to poke gentle fun at its administrators, without condemning the system itself. The gifts of the Romans to the Jews point to the gifts of the British empire to large areas of the planet.'⁶ But if the old is not totally thrown out, there is a degree of ideological reconfiguration and emphasis on what really matters. The alternative to the general criticism of religious interpretation in *Life of Brian* is found in the only real occasion when the film gets close to having a serious message: Brian's call for individualism and self-help over the collectivism of the crowd (p. 72). In the film this is a message of common sense (in both the popular and Gramscian meaning of the phrase) which ten years earlier could have been more naturally associated with anarchist and student voices from 1968.

2. The Radical Figure of Jesus/Brian

Life of Brian carries a number of ideological tensions in the aftermath of the 1960s which Thatcherism would attempt to harness, hold together, reconfigure, or transform. It did this partly by picking up on the Radical Jesus and transforming him into a figure more fit for late-twentieth-century Britain and, more specifically, through the figure of Brian. Moreover, through the figure of Brian, the film stealthily constructs a very different Jesus of history from the Christ of faith.⁷ But does not *Life of Brian* attack the problematic interpretation, 'established religion', and even religious belief itself? Certainly, but using Jesus to make such a point is hardly new (see Chapter 1); even dedicated atheists or non-Christians as diverse as Proudhon, John Lennon, Douglas Adams, and Bill Hicks could see Jesus ultimately as someone misunderstood by his followers and who could be salvaged for radical or liberal sensibilities.

But there is another related problem with the idea that Monty Python used the figure of Jesus: the argument that Jesus and Brian are obviously two different characters in *Life of Brian* and that Jesus is portrayed

6. P.R. Davies, 'Life of Brian Research', in *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2004), pp. 142-55 (152). This essay was first printed in J.C. Exum and S.D. Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 400-414.

7. For uses of the 'Christ of faith' and the 'Jesus of history' with reference to *Life of Brian* see Davies, 'Research', pp. 150-51.

respectfully and traditionally (certainly in terms of Hollywood Jesuses). Ever since opening in 1979 there have been consistent attempts to downplay the perceived blasphemous or disrespectful elements of *Life of Brian*. Eric Idle provided a standard defence of the film:

Christ is in the movie twice. His birth's in there in the first place and then He's in the Sermon on the Mount. There's no denial of His existence, it's all about churches, that's what it is...it's about people interpreting, people speaking for God and people wanting to kill for God...⁸

Even Terry Gilliam's diligent churchgoing mother did not see what all the fuss was about because there was, after all, differentiation between Jesus and Brian right at the beginning in the stable scene.⁹ Similar comments have been made by critical scholars such as Carl Dyke:

Brian is not directly blasphemous. Nor would it have a prayer of mainstream acceptance and effectiveness if it were. It is not a broadside or even a shot across the bows so much as a nudge in the ribs. With respect to Jesus, who makes three brief tangential appearances, the movie is down-right orthodox. In each case, the message is not that Jesus is wrong, or even that worshipping Jesus is wrong, but that fallible humans find all sorts of creative ways to get worshipping Jesus wrong... The Pythons' Jesus is not just behaviourally appropriate: he is divine... In terms of core Christian beliefs, the movie is reverent and unquestioning... Overall, by accepting the common sense of Jesus' divinity and ethical authority, *The Life of Brian* locates itself squarely within the hegemonic network of Christianity.¹⁰

These kinds of arguments are necessary partly because there have been, obviously, allegations of blasphemy and offensiveness aimed at the film and such allegations could be made, as we will shortly see, by audiences assuming Brian really is Jesus. Aside from the infamous attacks from Mervyn Stockwood (the then Bishop of Southwark) and Malcolm Muggeridge on the BBC 2 show *Friday Night, Saturday Morning* (BBC, 1979), there was uproar aplenty. In America, the film faced protests

8. The Pythons, *The Pythons' Autobiography* (London: Orion, 2003), p. 385.

9. Pythons, *Autobiography*, p. 355; Sellers, *Bright Side*, p. 21.

10. C. Dyke, 'Learning from *The Life of Brian*: Saviors for Seminars', in G. Aichele and R. Walsh (eds.), *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2002), pp. 229-50 (237-38, 240). See further R. Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), pp. 29-33, 38-39; R. Walsh, 'Three Versions of ~~Judas~~ Jesus', in G. Aichele and R. Walsh (eds.), *Those Outside: Non-canonical Readings of the Canonical Gospels* (New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2005), pp. 155-81 (160 n. 11); R. Walsh, 'Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979)', in A. Reinhartz (ed.), *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 187-92.

outside cinemas in New York, it was not shown in parts of the Bible Belt, and one Texas cinema received a bomb threat. In the UK there were also the obligatory protests along with prayers encouraged for the film's downfall, arguments made for the imprisonment of the participants, and banning of the film in Harrogate, Swansea (until 1997), parts of Surrey, East Devon, and Cornwall. Channel 4 had to wait until 1991 to broadcast it on television, six years after it was originally intended for broadcast. It was also banned in Ireland, Norway, and Italy.¹¹ Film executives also had serious problems with the film. Bernard Delfont of EMI dropped *Life of Brian* just as filming was due to start because of the script's perceived blasphemous content, and meetings with potential backers in America were unsuccessful because of fears surrounding offense.¹²

The idea that Brian might be Jesus was, then, clearly controversial and deemed offensive by some groups. What is curious about this is that some of the ideas attributed to Brian have been, as we will see, attributed to the historical Jesus in scholarship for 200 years and they once had the power to destroy academic careers. Yet the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus had little wider impact by the 1970s and, when placed outside the universities, could clearly still have the power to shock when its ideas were presented, at least in coded form, to a wider audience. *Life of Brian* is part of this tradition in that it is offensive to those Christians who may personally find reconstructions of the historical Jesus blasphemous, as well as a mocking of central Christian beliefs, because an outright attack on the figure of Jesus himself it clearly is not.

The major way in which Monty Python can challenge the traditional Christ of faith is by making what should be an obvious intertwining of the lives of Brian and the Jesus of the gospels. Malcolm Muggeridge and Mervyn Stockwood recognised this when they suggested to John Cleese and Michael Palin that Brian was obviously Christ. However, Muggeridge and Stockwood had missed the first fifteen minutes of the film where the sort-of-distinction is made!¹³ Yet, pretentious though their evidence-lite posturing infamously was, Muggeridge and Stockwood still had a point: there *is* significant overlap between the characters. Jesus and Brian are born at the same time and at the same place. The baby Brian is even mistaken for the baby Jesus by the three wise men. The other key distinction scene is where Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount. Yet even the Mount provides another notable similarity. In the screen version

11. For further details of various controversies see R. Hewison, *Monty Python: The Case Against* (New York: Grove, 1981); Sellers, *Bright Side*, pp. 14-21.

12. Pythons, *Autobiography*, pp. 365-68.

13. Pythons, *Autobiography*, pp. 384-85; Sellers, *Bright Side*, p. 19.

of the film a special cameo character is reserved for the film's eleventh-hour backer, ex-Beatle George Harrison. This character is Mr Papadopoulos who happened to reserve the Mount for Brian.

In fact, numerous aspects of the lives of Brian and Jesus have explicit similarities. Brian is also named with reference to the same hometown as Jesus (i.e. Brian of Nazareth; cf. e.g. Matt. 2.23). Both Brian and Jesus were, of course, proclaimed 'the Messiah' by followers. As people asked Jesus for a sign (e.g. Matt. 12.38; 16.1) which Jesus can refuse to give (e.g. Mark 8.12; Matt. 12.39; 16.4) so people ask for a sign which Brian does everything but give (pp. 59-60, 62-64).¹⁴ Their use of language is often intimately similar and regularly laced with comic twists, at least in the case of Brian. This is particularly so when Brian has to pose as a prophet to avoid detection by the Romans using some quite straightforward distorted parallels to some of the more famous sayings and parables of Jesus (pp. 53-55; cf. Matt. 5.1-12; Luke 6.20-26; Exod. 20.17; Deut. 5.21; Matt. 6.25-34; 7.1-2; 18.23-35; 21.28-32; 25.14-30; Luke 16.1-8; 19.11-27). The respective deaths of Jesus and Brian are also very similar. Not only are both crucified but both are crucified as revolutionary threats (cf. Mark 15.6-16, 27). These blindingly obvious parallels should immediately prick the ears of any viewer who wishes to know whether the film is trying to say something about Jesus.

So certain opponents of the film are in one sense right: Brian sort of *is* Jesus. In fact it is not just opponents of the film who pick up on this. This is obviously implied when Philip Davies notes the observation that 'Brian both *is* Jesus and is clearly *not* Jesus' which Davies shows was a particularly useful way of allowing the film 'to escape a certain amount of criticism for blasphemy or poor taste'.¹⁵ From within the Python circle Terry Gilliam recalls the genesis of Brian after the completion of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam, 1974): 'very quickly we came around to the feeling that Jesus was OK we weren't going to take the piss out of him, he was genuinely OK, so that's where Brian got created, he was a parallel'.¹⁶ *Life of Brian* furthers this overlapping by applying to Brian controversial views about Jesus (and the historical Jesus in particular) which have been put forward both in modern critical scholarship, as well as by ancient critics of what we would now call orthodox Christianity. That Monty Python created a 'real' historical figure of Jesus who was of relevance for the contemporary

14. For a list of the 'sign' passages in the gospels see Davies, 'Research', p. 147.

15. Davies, 'Research', p. 148; cf. p. 150.

16. Pythons, *Autobiography*, p. 353.

world is implied to some extent by Graham Chapman: 'That movie, if it said anything at all, said think for yourselves, don't blindly follow, which I think isn't a bad message and I'm sure Mr Christ would have agreed'.¹⁷

To create this dual focus on 'real' historical past and contemporary ideological relevance, the film used the latest, most famous or most provocative critical biblical scholarship which itself was very much a part of the intellectual, popular, and cultural milieu at the time when *Life of Brian* was being written, even if we cannot pin down precisely which books were read or the precise sources used for this or that theme. Indeed, not only did the Pythons read and re-read the Gospel texts and ancient literature, as several of those involved mention,¹⁸ but, as Michael Palin recalled, the Pythons immersed themselves in the world of critical Gospel studies:

...it was a very academic approach. We read books about the Bible story and that period, the Dead Sea Scrolls and *various new interpretations of the Gospels*, that sort of thing, just because we all felt, well, we can't just do silly jokes about people being knocked off donkeys, there's got to be a kind of philosophical approach as well.¹⁹

So, what sort of 'various new interpretations of the Gospels' influenced the writing and production of the film and enabled Monty Python to drill down to the 'real' historical Jesus?

3. He's Not the Messiah and He's Not the Resurrection

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. (1 Cor. 15.12-14)

To drill back down to the historical Jesus, *Life of Brian* presented an attempted debunking of two of the biggest historical claims made about Jesus: that he was 'the Messiah' and that he was resurrected from the dead. Combined with this is the implicit denial in *Life of Brian* that death-by-crucifixion – which certainly did happen according to *Life of Brian* – has any theological significance.

17. Pythons, *Autobiography*, p. 370.

18. Pythons, *Autobiography*, pp. 355-56. Davies, 'Research', pp. 143-48, provides numerous parallels between *Life of Brian* and ancient sources, both biblical and non-biblical.

19. Quoted in Sellers, *Bright Side*, p. 4 (my italics).

To help with debunking messiahship, there already existed a respectable scholarly tradition that held that Brian was not the only one who did not claim to be the Messiah while his followers went ahead and made a dubious link. Given the absence of the term on the lips of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is often argued that Jesus never regarded himself as 'the Messiah', at least in the titular sense, and that the title was developed by the gospels or earlier post-Jesus tradition. This 'Messianic secret' theory provided by William Wrede in 1901 in relation to the earliest of the gospels, Mark, provided the basis for the most influential explanation of the transition from Jesus not thinking he was 'the Messiah' to the first Christians believing he was.²⁰ Despite criticisms and qualifications, the 'Messianic secret' remains a very popular theory to this day. It is one of the most basic theories taught in critical biblical studies and was, significantly enough, translated into English in 1971.²¹ Put crudely, it was and is argued that the Messianic secrecy theme was a theological device developed by the writer of Mark's Gospel to explain the problem of why the historical Jesus was not believed to be, or did not claim to be, the Messiah. The writer of Mark's Gospel, so dominant forms of the argument go, made sure to construct a Jesus who kept his true identity quiet and did not want it revealed until after the resurrection. In other words, the messianic identity of Jesus was effectively a creation of Jesus' followers and did not come from the historical Jesus himself. The Messianic secrecy theme was and is built on the peculiar emphasis in Mark's Gospel where Jesus commands demons to be silent because they know who he really is (Mark 1.25, 34; 3.11-12), tells cured individuals to be quiet about what has happened (Mark 1.44; 5.43; 7.36; 8.26), and even asks his disciples not to tell anyone about grand claims (Mark 8.30; 9.9). The disciples are frequently taught in private and frequently misunderstand him. To add to the confusion the Markan Jesus suggests that his parables were designed to confuse:

20. W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901).

21. The English translation of Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* is by J.C.G. Greig, *The Messianic Secret* (London: James Clark, 1971). See further e.g. J.L. Blevins, *The Messianic Secret in Markan Research 1901-1976* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981); C.M. Tuckett (ed.), *The Messianic Secret* (London: SPCK, 1983); H. Räisänen, *The 'Messianic Secret' in Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990); W.R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 41-54.

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret (or: mystery) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look but not perceive, and may listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.' (Mark 4.10-12)

We might also note that where the 1970s opened with the English translation of Wrede, it wound down with another prominent book on mystery in the Gospels: Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy*. Kermode's book was initially delivered as the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard between 1977 and 1978 and included an opening chapter on that classic problem of the riddle of Markan parable telling (Mark 4.11-12).²² Whilst not positing direct sources, it is clear that ideas concerning secrecy, linked with Jesus' identity, were very much part of creative mainstream New Testament scholarship as *Life of Brian* was coming into being.²³

Something roughly akin to the scholarly secrecy theory can easily be noted in a critical reading of the Gospel texts, at least in the sense that the first Christians were in the process of conveniently remembering great things about Jesus or neglecting to tell people certain dramatic events (cf. Mark 16.8). Look at the following Gospel texts and note the role of interpretation by followers (a key theme in *Life of Brian*, of course):

The Jews said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'. The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scriptures and the word that Jesus had spoken. (John 2.19-22)

As they were coming down the mountain, he [Jesus] ordered them [certain disciples] to tell no one about what they had seen [the transfiguration of Jesus], until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. (Mark 9.9-10)

Rightly or wrongly, a hermeneutic of suspicion, coupled with a non-Christian perspective, might almost inevitably lead to slightly sarcastic mutterings that someone else might be making some remarkable claims

22. F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

23. I owe this latter point on Kermode to Deane Galbraith.

on behalf of Jesus here and without his consent. Such a combination of scepticism and suspicion is clear in John Cleese's assessment of the Gospel miracles which, incidentally, is close to Geza Vermes' discussion of Jesus as a charismatic healer and exorcist from his book which seems to have directly or indirectly influenced *Life of Brian* (see below), and a view which has a long scholarly pedigree:²⁴

I don't know about the miracles, I mean a lot of the healing, the faith healing, I would imagine was absolutely sensible. I mean anyone who is suffering from the symptoms of something that's basically got a hysterical foundation then that could easily happen. I would have thought that just as much as faith healing is a fact of life. It all makes sense to me. Water into wine I would be very dubious about, frankly Brian [laugh]. Over the moon if it happened but...²⁵

As Richard Walsh put it: 'One may remember that messianic acclamations are wrong more often than not, if not always. At least one laughs at the incongruity of an ordinary, Jewish, bastard, Messiah. Of course (wink wink) this is not the Gospel Jesus.'²⁶

Life of Brian clearly has some very obvious parallels to followers who have made claims about their figurehead without permission and who have gone well beyond what was actually said. Miracles wrongly and stupidly get attributed to Brian and the crowd wrongly believe signs have been presented. And all along, of course, Brian wants nothing to do with the idea that he is the Messiah or indeed anything special but, for all his denials, he becomes the Messiah nonetheless (pp. 64-65). Note also the state in which Brian had just previously left the crowd by neglecting to finish off his parables once the Romans were out of sight, the very point where the crowd shake off their disdain and start getting interested. Paradoxically, it is Brian the hopeless storyteller who, without thinking, leaves his story tantalisingly unfinished and with his audience wanting more, the one narrative device which any storyteller worth their salt

24. G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp. 22-23: 'Four of them [exorcism stories]... describe as demonic possession what seems to have been mental or nervous illness... It ought to be mentioned at this juncture that the psychiatrist whom I have consulted on the question whether most of the diseases exorcised or healed in the New Testament could be recognized as hysterical, after giving a qualified affirmative reply, wished to know the success rate of the treatment and the state of health of the patients six months after discharge!' By the 1970s, the most prominent book on miracles in the Gospel tradition, H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), was also entertaining similar ideas.

25. *The Pythons: A Documentary* (BBC/Python [Monty] Pictures, 1979).

26. Walsh, 'Monty Python's *Life of Brian*', p. 191.

might use. Now Brian has got the confused crowd hooked and wanting the explanations of his mysteries and secrets yet ultimately they remain confused by, but confident in, their new saviour (pp. 56-57). It is worth adding that in the gospels it is precisely after Jesus has given the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4.1-8), and precisely before he gives the explanation of the parable (Mark 4.13-20), that we get the above mentioned discussion of mysteries, explanations, and outsiders (Mark 4.10-12).

The resurrection of Jesus is of course *the* big miraculous action of Christian tradition and, despite virtually all other humanities subjects having long moved on from discussing whether such spectacular miracles can or cannot happen, the debates still rage fiercely in certain theological and biblical studies circles.²⁷ The sentiments of *Life of Brian*, it might reasonably be suspected, are on the side of those who would reject the view that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. The resurrection is implicitly challenged by providing no indication that Brian was to be resurrected from the dead, despite more-or-less following the Gospel narrative outline. In fact, *Life of Brian* implies the very opposite.²⁸ Whereas the Gospel stories end with Jesus being resurrected from the dead, *Life of Brian* conspicuously ends with Brian crucified, a notable contrast given the parallel lives of the two figures. If there is escape from death-by-crucifixion in the narrative world of *Life of Brian* it is not supernatural but very much this worldly and merely a temporary escape from the inevitability of death. One means of escape is by sheer cunning, by falsely claiming you are the one pardoned (pp. 96-97). Another is to have a rescue party arranged, perhaps led by your brother (p. 95). Yet another is to have some do-gooder take your place (pp. 89-90, 94; cf. Mark 15.21). Brian is clearly not so fortunate, emphasised by a sorry string of misunderstanding and incompetence, from the rendition of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' to the crack suicide squad (compare Masada²⁹) pointlessly killing themselves even *after* the guards have fled

27. For a recent overview of scholarship see G.R. Habermas, 'Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?', *JSHJ* 3 (2005), pp. 135-53. It is only fair to point out, however, that attempts to locate conservative approaches in mainstream interdisciplinary historical research have recently been strongly emphasised. See e.g. M.R. Licona and J.G. van der Watt, 'The Adjudication of Miracles: Rethinking the Criteria of Historicity', *HTR* 65 (2009), pp. 62-68; M.R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historical Approach* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

28. Cf. R. Walsh, 'The Gospel according to Judas: Myth and Parable', in J.C. Exum (ed.), *The Bible in Film – The Bible and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 37-53 (50).

29. Davies, 'Research', p. 144, further suggests a superficial parody of Japanese suicide squads.

in terror. Brian's stark fate is finally and conclusively underscored by Eric Idle's popular song, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life', where a full embrace of the joys of this life is the only challenge to the inevitability of an eternity in the dust (pp. 100-101).

As Hans Wiersma stressed, mocking and undermining the brutal nature of crucifixion – and implicitly Jesus' death and its theological significance – runs throughout *Life of Brian* and may be as jarring as any theme for Christians, or indeed anyone familiar with what actually happens to those crucified.³⁰ However, unlike the handling of resurrection and messiahship there is no significant indication that the crucifixion is denied as a historical event and nor is there any *influential* scholarly or popular tradition making such denials. There are certainly some relatively old traditions which have Jesus somehow avoiding crucifixion (cf. *Gospel of Barnabas* 217-18; Qur'an 4.157-58) and which may be hinted at in *Life of Brian* when the Simon of Cyrene-like saintly passer-by takes up Alfonso's cross and ends up taking his place.³¹ However, this is not developed in any way relating to Brian or covered in any detail. Nevertheless, and clearly tied in with the denial of resurrection, is an undermining of any theological significance of the central symbol of Christianity. Monty Python's Jesus-Brian is not the Messiah, he is not resurrected from the dead, and the cross has no theological significance; he is just an ordinary misunderstood human being. This much puts Brian in a recognisable tradition of Jesuses in liberal and radical circles whose less-tainted ideological position can be found behind the later accretions of the church and interpretation. But, as with such Jesuses, they have a message for their time. Brian is no exception and his message is a recognisable one in the array of overlapping and often contradictory ideological views of post-1960s Britain and England in the build-up to Thatcherism.

4. Jesus and Brian, Revolution, and Trade Unions

We have seen some of the ways in which the 1960s, in general, and 1967–68, in particular, generated revolutionary enthusiasm – and eventual disappointment or rethinking. Alongside Christopher Hill's seventeenth-century radicals, the historical figure of Jesus would also prove useful for certain scholars to think through the contemporary social upheavals of the 1960s, though the influence in the field of biblical studies was not as

30. H. Wiersma, 'Redeeming *Life of Brian*: How Monty Python (Ironically) Proclaims Christ *Sub Contrario*', *Word and World* 32 (2012), pp. 166-77.

31. Davies, 'Research', p. 147.

significant as that of Hill on historians and the humanities. More specifically, and not unlike the disgruntled Brian, a revolutionary anti-Roman disposition has been attributed to the historical Jesus. By the time of *Life of Brian*, this was most famously (and then recently) argued by S.G.F. Brandon in the 1960s.³² Brandon argued that the gospel traditions were edited after the failed Jewish revolt against Rome where there was much opposition to Judaism in Christianity and, consequently, the nationalistic overtones of a revolutionary Jesus were airbrushed from history. Brandon's revolutionary Jesus never gained a widespread following in academia and quickly led to an attempted debunking by leading New Testament scholars such as Martin Hengel.³³ Yet outside scholarship (even if Brandon's work was more popularising than most) the revolutionary Jesus had already gained enough popular acclaim among leftist groups during the Cold War to warrant a stern rebuke from another leading New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, Günther Bornkamm:

Jesus' sayings are directed at two fronts, which are as relevant today as they were in the days of Jesus and the early Church. The first front of the fanatics who wish to claim Jesus for their own as the great revolutionary... Its threat is still with us. In Marxism and Bolshevism we have today, though greatly changed, an example of its historical reality...and these revolutionaries, when they wanted to claim Jesus as an ally in the struggle for a new world or social order, have had to learn again and again that they could not rely long on this ally... It is therefore not surprising that today this alliance, often enough attempted in revolutionary movements of the West, has apparently been definitely renounced...³⁴

32. See e.g. S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967); S.G.F. Brandon, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1968).

33. E.g. O. Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (New York: Harper Row, 1970); M. Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). Interestingly though the idea of an anti-imperial Jesus and anti-imperial early church has begun to re-emerge in recent years and is popular at present among New Testament scholars. See e.g. R. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). Even conservative Christian scholars will now stress the Jesus movement as one in opposition to Rome. See e.g. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

34. G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), pp. 101-102.

In *Life of Brian* the revolutionary ambitions of Brian are absolutely explicit; or, to put it another way, he is a Brandon-esque Jesus and an un-Bornkamm-esque Jesus. Brian is desperate to join the general revolutionary movement and ends up as a member of the People's Front of Judea. But Brian's romantic hopes are undermined by the sheer incompetency of his fellow revolutionaries and the pedantic squabbles of the Judean People's Front, the People's Front of Judea, and the Campaign for Free Galilee, for which, of course, read twentieth-century trade unions and Marxist groups. Brian, with the partial exception of his lover Judith, is the only sane and reasonable figure with any inkling of how to get some kind of result – no mean feat when adrift in a sea of hopeless incompetence. Indeed, Brian's focus and anti-imperial hostilities transcend the childish revolutionary infighting during the attempt to kidnap Pilate's wife and mutilate or kill her if the quasi-Marxist demands to dismantle 'the entire apparatus of the Roman Imperialist State' (p. 27) were not met. And so when the fight breaks out between the Campaign for Free Galilee and the People's Front of Judea over who thought up the kidnap idea, Brian tries to unite the rebels against the common Roman enemy rather than the Judean People's Front (p. 32). And yet such ideals remain a romantic, albeit honourable, vision – this revolution was always doomed to fail because of general idiocy with a touch of cowardice and self-preservation.

As has been pointed out by Davies with reference to *Life of Brian*, revolutionary infighting was the kind of behaviour which the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus highlighted around the time of the failed Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70 CE, and which according to Josephus was, if anything, more likely to cause disaster than the Romans.³⁵ For readers who are familiar with Monty Python, the following recollection from Josephus concerning Jewish internecine fighting could almost inevitably be read as a proto-Pythonesque narrative:

The conspirators against the city being now divided into three camps, Eleazar's party, having the keeping of the sacred first-fruits, directed their drunken fury against John; the latter with his associates plundered the townsfolk and wreaked their rage upon Simon; while Simon also to meet the rival factions looked to the city for supplies. Whenever John found himself attacked on both sides, he would face his men about in opposite directions, on the one hand hurling missiles from the porticoes upon those coming up from the town, on the other repelling with his engines those who were pouring their javelins upon him from the temple... [A]nd upon his retreat Simon advanced and did the same; as though they were

35. E.g. Davies, 'Research', pp. 143-45.

purposely serving the Romans by destroying what the city had provided against a siege and severing the sinews of their own strength... [T]he brigand chiefs, divided on all else, put to death as their common enemies any in favour of peace with the Romans or suspected of an intention to desert, and were unanimous only in slaughtering those deserving of deliverance... The rival parties... were at grips, trampling over the dead bodies that were piled upon each other, the frenzy inhaled from the corpses at their feet increasing their savagery; and ever inventing some new instrument of mutual destruction. (Josephus, *War* 5.21-34; cf. 5.5-20; see also Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.12.4)

We can only begin to speculate about what might have happened had someone suggested that the factions unite against the common enemy. But, unlike the tragi-comic portrayals of these revolutionary figures of both screen and (Josephus' version of) first-century history, Brian actually manages to get something done on his first revolutionary outing: the anti-Roman graffiti act. This small act of antiestablishment rebellion, like Jesus' overturning of the tables of the moneychangers and dove-sellers (Mark 11), directly leads to Brian's crucifixion.

We might make a further suggestion about one possible ramification of the idea of Brian the revolutionary and, by implication, Jesus. What *Life of Brian* does is show that crucifixion is far from being a unique punishment effectively reserved for Jesus (and perhaps the two bandits) in human history. Rather, Brian is just one of many people crucified at the end of the film, including people being crucified for little more than a casual punch-up. Crucifixion is referenced commonly enough in ancient sources, including, or especially, in Josephus. It is perhaps worth noting that when the relatively successful bandit, Eleazar ben Dinai, was finally captured under Felix (c. 52–60 CE) after twenty years on the run, indiscriminate crucifixions were meted out according to Josephus: 'Of the brigands whom he crucified, and of the common people who were convicted of complicity with them and punished by him, the number was incalculable' (*War* 2.253; cf. *Ant.* 20.160-161). If the arguments presented in this chapter are correct, including the idea of a revolutionary Jesus underlying Brian, then could *Life of Brian* be further suggesting that Jesus too was little more than just another victim of indiscriminate Roman punishment in a world where people follow any old Messiah and any old prophet (cf. Josephus, *War* 2.258)?

However, what is left of Brian's revolutionary thinking is of most significance for our purposes. Brian ultimately thinks that revolutionary after revolutionary who appear at his crucifixion are misguided fools with ultimately absurd ideas. A horrified Brian labels his comrades 'bastards' after Reg, on behalf of the revolutionaries of the People's

Front of Judea, offers up congratulations on the occasion of his apparent martyrdom (p. 96). But it is not just the ever-ineffective revolutionaries of the People's Front of Judea: Brian can only sigh at the absurdity after the crack suicide squad kill themselves despite the Romans fleeing in fear (p. 97) and even his lover Judith finally succumbs to the absurd worldview of Reg and his similarly deluded revolutionary siblings. In addition to the revolutionary failures, the film itself does not really have a wholly negative view of the Roman Empire, for which, of course, we can also read the British Empire (see above). With the revolution more-or-less as debunked as messiahship and resurrection are, Brian leaves us with his one enduring message from the film: you are all individuals. Is this story from revolution to being an individual who can do it for themselves not a textbook post-1960s case?

5. Thinking about Sex

One way 1960s individualism was expressed was, of course, through the famed free-love and sexual liberation which might have been enthusiastically embraced or viewed with outrage depending on your perspective on such matters. While Brian did not get the chance to marry he was hardly uncomfortable with the idea of a pre-marital dalliance with probably the only other revolutionary who comes close to being sensible: Judith. And it is undeniably clear that they engaged in an enjoyable night which moved well beyond heavy-petting. This is clearer still in the script which explicitly refers to seemingly naughty behaviour during the night (p. 66) while the script emphasises further that Brian has his mind on the quality of their nocturnal activities while Judith has her mind on Brian's teachings (p. 77). This, combined with full-frontal nudity, was not just a product of provocative and playful attitudes nurtured in the 1960s; the Monty Python team would almost certainly have known that the image of Jesus had been given a free-love makeover. The question of Jesus having erotic thoughts has a long history and today typically, perhaps inevitably, gets raised in the secularised or less conservative quarters of theological reflection on the humanity of Jesus. The canonical Gospels and Christian orthodoxy do not explicitly entertain the idea that Jesus had sexual feelings for another human being. But the view that Jesus was in love in some way or other with Mary Magdalene has been a subversive and provocative view of Jesus which dates back to the first few centuries after Jesus' death and has recently proven popular, if the success of the *Da Vinci Code* and a whole host of sensationalist literature is anything to go by. This tradition also has a major cinematic moment,

of course, in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Universal Pictures, 1988) which was released less than ten years after *Life of Brian* and based on the 1950s novel by Nikos Kazantzakis.³⁶ The key ancient text for the tradition of Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene, even if it has or has not been misread, is the apocryphal *Gospel of Philip*. Here Mary was Jesus' consort, favoured among the disciples and the woman whom Jesus used to kiss on the mouth (*Gospel of Philip*, Saying 59; cf. Saying 36).

But erotic tendencies and naïve thoughts of love were also a family trait, at least in the case of Brian. Mandy may have protested too much at Judith and her son's sleeping arrangements. Brian's father, we learn from Mandy, was not in fact Mr Cohen (not that this surprised Brian) but the Roman centurion, Nortius Maximus. The disbelieving Brian asks whether she was raped to which his mother replies that this was the case... at first (p. 18). By the time the issue of Mandy's virginity explicitly arises in *Life of Brian* it is already crystal clear that she is not a virgin and that the story of her virginity gets falsely attributed to her by Brian's pious-but-stupid followers (pp. 72-73). We even get clear echoes of one of the pinnacles of Mariology, the 'Hail Mary', chanted in unison by the crowd to the Mother of Brian (p. 71; cf. John 19.27). This sort of reasoning has a not-so-subtle parallel with certain views of Jesus' origins. In fact from the second century CE (and no doubt before) opponents of Christianity have tried to explain Gospel stories of the virgin birth (Matt. 1-2; Luke 1-2) differently. One explanation was that the story of Mary's virginity was designed to cover up a dark secret, namely that the real father was not even the saintly Joseph but a not-so-saintly Roman soldier called Panthera. The following is the relatively famous attempted refutation by Origen (c. 182-251 CE):

But let us now return to where the Jew is introduced, speaking of the mother of Jesus, and saying that 'when she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera'. And let us see whether those who have blindly concocted these fables about the adultery of the Virgin with Panthera, and her rejection by the carpenter, did not invent these stories to overturn his miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit: for they could have falsified the history in a different manner, on account of its extremely miraculous character, and not have admitted, as it were against their will, that Jesus was born of no ordinary human marriage. (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.32).

36. N. Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975).

Another version of this tradition occurs, for example, in the *Toledoth Yeshu*, a Jewish anti-Christian polemic which parodies the life of Jesus:

Near his house dwelt a widow and her lovely and chaste daughter named Miriam. Miriam was betrothed to Yohanan, of the royal house of David, a man learned in the Torah and God-fearing. At the close of a certain Sabbath, Joseph Pandera, attractive and like a warrior in appearance, having gazed lustfully upon Miriam, knocked upon the door of her room and betrayed her by pretending that he was her betrothed husband, Yohanan. Even so, she was amazed at this improper conduct and submitted only against her will. Thereafter, when Yohanan came to her, Miriam expressed astonishment at behaviour so foreign to his character. It was thus that they both came to know the crime of Joseph Pandera and the terrible mistake on the part of Miriam... Miriam gave birth to a son...³⁷

In addition to these ancient polemical traditions, countless modern-day biblical critics have suggested that the gospel stories of the virgin birth are pious fictions like other stories of miraculous or unusual origins in the history of religions, such as stories in Israelite tradition (e.g. Gen. 17.15-18; 21.1-2) or stories of major figures like Alexander the Great (Plutarch, *Alexander* 2.1-3.4), while scholars such as Jane Schaberg and Gerd Lüdemann have taken extremely seriously the idea that Mary was raped in their historical reconstructions of Jesus' birth.³⁸ The development of Mariology was in many ways a pious creation of religious admirers (cf. Luke 1.39-56) and a big step on the way to high Mariology which was eventually to become associated with the Catholic Church in particular. By the 1970s, this sort of reasoning had, of course, a long academic history, and would have been among the most obvious scholarly traditions for any budding sceptic to exploit. For what it might be worth, we might add that, in 1977, Raymond Brown published his massive and influential commentary on the infancy narratives.³⁹ Even if the Monty Python team had not consulted this comprehensive commentary

37. M. Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 148-54.

38. J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987 [reprinted and expanded for Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006]); G. Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

39. R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (rev. edn; London: Chapman, 1993 [1977]). Any number of conservative, radical, and liberal explanations of the virgin birth stories could be cited from the history of critical scholarship but the usual starting point, with discussions of the key positions, remains Brown's massive work of reference.

(and even if they had, they might not have found it entirely agreeable), the ideas accepted and critiqued by Brown were at the forefront of, and 'in the air' around, mainstream New Testament scholarship of the time.

This is, of course, another aspect of Monty Python debunking stories later attributed to Jesus (and Mary), just like the resurrection and messianic claims. But there is another aspect to this view of how Brian/Jesus was conceived: sexuality and single-parenthood is more-or-less out in the open in a way we might not expect from previous Jesus-films. Even Mandy, who relentlessly complains about Brian's apparent obsession with sex, is still happy enough giving oral relief to a Roman soldier and only just after Brian has left their house. Indeed, Brian appears perfectly comfortable with the notion that his father was not Mr Cohen; his problem was when he found out his father was not Jewish but Roman. Mandy may have hidden the ethnicity of Brian's father but the only thing resembling potential social tension was Brian's anti-Roman imperialism which might also land them in trouble. And, of course, and in part as a reaction to increasing cultural prominence, Mandy was to foreshadow that negative stereotype of the political right in the 1980s: the single mother.

6. The Multicultural Jewish Brian of History

Another point of historical Jesus research which influenced *Life of Brian* is the seemingly banal fact that Jesus was a Jew. We might illuminate the once surprising nature of this point by simply recalling the clichéd cinematic and visual images of the blond-haired, blue-eyed Christ. Brian is, of course, anything but the Christ of faith and is a fairly 'ordinary' Jew who wears a skull cap as a matter of routine. His surname, 'Cohen', is as recognisably Jewish as could be imagined. Indeed, one of Brian's particular concerns in the face of Roman occupation is his Jewish identity and he only attempts to use his Roman connections to escape crucifixion (p. 40). When stunned about the news of his father being a Roman, Brian throws an adolescent tantrum, proclaiming his Jewishness through a number of slang terms (p. 19).⁴⁰

In modern historical Jesus scholarship the phrase 'Jesus the Jew' is a well-known scholarly cliché but in the early 1970s it was anything but a banal fact. In 1973 Geza Vermes published one of the most famous

40. See also A. Reinhartz, 'Jesus in Film: Hollywood Perspectives on the Jewishness of Jesus', *JRF* 2 (1998), <http://www.unomaha.edu/~jrf/JesusinFilmRein.htm>.

books in historical Jesus studies with the then revolutionary title, *Jesus the Jew*. Some reviewers – but far from all – were suitably outraged at this suggestion, although some of the criticisms appear to follow the route of being more indirectly critical of the theory and more critical of the abilities of the scholar. As Vermes recalls in his autobiography,

A Jewish critic, violently resenting my refusal to classify Jesus as a Pharisee, put me among the anti-Semites. A well-known English Jesuit now deceased described the book's learning as 'at times...oppressive'. He blamed the 'overcrowded' character of the volume on my 'apparent desire' to show off my familiarity with Christian biblical criticism! An American Bible expert, taking exception to my light-hearted remark that New Testament scholars often wear the blinkers of their trade, haughtily dismissed the book with 'Jesus the Jew deserves better than this'. A French woman writer, contributing to a right-wing magazine, settled for the double denunciation of 'scandal and blasphemy'.⁴¹

Yet, as Vermes also realised, the phrase would soon ease into scholarly language with little additional difficulty.

Vermes' Jesus was not the Christ of conventional Christian faith. He was a charismatic holy man of Jewish tradition who observed the biblical commandments such as Sabbath and food laws, or at least in ways paralleled in early Judaism, and happened to be crucified through being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He did not think of himself as the Messiah or anything too grand. In fact most of the titles the historical Jesus might have used (e.g. son of man, son of God, etc.) are shown by Vermes to have a more this-worldly frame of reference as opposed to indicating anything like the second person of the Trinity. Despite the consistent scholarly rhetoric that Jesus was a Jew, this emphasis has caused some problems for Christian academics. There are endless scholarly constructions of Jewish identity as effectively fixed and stable, which has a key function of providing 'the Jewish background' to be transcended by Jesus (who rhetorically remains 'very Jewish' in doing so), no doubt in part because of a socio-religious pressure to show to the faithful that he was still something a bit more spectacular than just a charismatic holy man.⁴²

41. G. Vermes, *Providential Accidents: An Autobiography* (London: SCM Press, 1998), pp. 213-14.

42. For discussion see esp. Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus*; Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror*, pp. 143-94; Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism*.

It is important to put this scholarly and cultural tradition into wider historical and cultural perspective. Prior to Vermes the dominant position in critical scholarship (and more broadly in popular understandings of Jesus) – influenced by nearly 2000 years of church teaching – was sharply to differentiate Jesus from Judaism. In the context of Nazi Germany this reached new depths with some now truly bizarre sounding claims, such as Walter Grundmann's argument that Jesus was more likely to have been of Aryan descent.⁴³ Grundmann belonged to the Nazi party and was a supporting member of the SS yet, despite the obvious antisemitic influences on his work, continued to be regarded as a serious scholar well beyond 1945. Grundmann was far from the only Nazi involved in New Testament scholarship.⁴⁴

Even though Nazi Christians were discredited after the Second World War, anti-Judaism was a constant feature of post-war New Testament scholarship. But, despite the discrediting of Nazi Christian scholars, the lack of interest in the 'Jewishness' of Jesus, the clear differentiation of Jewish Christians like Paul from Judaism, and the generally negative construction of early Judaism, remained firmly rooted in New Testament scholarship and the churches, even among those who were opponents of antisemitism and the Nazi party.⁴⁵ Buoyed along by a sea change in dominant Anglo-American attitudes towards Israel, the Holocaust, and Judaism after the Six Day War and the emergence of liberal multiculturalism,⁴⁶ Vermes' *Jesus the Jew* in turn paved the way for the positive reception of E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, which

43. For further discussion see e.g. S. Heschel, 'Nazifying Christian Theology Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life', *CH* 63 (1994), pp. 587-605; Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*; Casey, 'Anti-Semitic Assumptions'; Head, 'Nazi Quest', pp. 55-89.

44. Gerhard Kittel, for instance, was not only a Nazi propagandist but also editor of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. This work is still recommended to undergraduates and still utilised by leading professors despite many of the early contributions being riddled with and distorted by antisemitism and anti-Judaism. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (10 vols.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933-79). Grundmann also participated in the *TWNT* project. For further discussion see e.g. Casey, 'Anti-Semitic Assumptions'.

45. See further e.g. D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 212-14; Casey, 'Anti-Semitic Assumptions'; Kelley, *Racializing Jesus*; J.G. Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Socio-Historical Account of Christian Origins, 26-50 CE* (Louisville: WJK, 2006), Chapter 1.

46. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror*, pp. 177-94.

perhaps more than any work in New Testament studies made scholars aware of the extent to which Judaism was cast in a negative light.⁴⁷ Without this context it is easy to underestimate the then unusual nature of Vermes' portrait of Jesus the Jew, even if it was starting to become partly domesticated (at least in scholarship) by the 1980s.

An aside on Thatcher and the emergence of Thatcherism might illuminate the point further. As we saw in the chapter on Thatcher, she believed that Judaism and Christianity were representative of 'western religions' with their shared emphasis on the value of work and the creativity of the individual, as well as seeing Jews, Judaism, and her Old Testament as epitomising the basic values of Thatcherism. Her closest ally from the religious establishment was the Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits. Already present in her engagement with Jewish voters in Finchley, Thatcher's attitude towards Jewish people was noted by high profile Tories, and with some surprise given the levels of disdain towards Jewish people in the decades leading up to Thatcherism. As the former Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, described Thatcher, 'there was not the faintest trace of anti-Semitism in her make-up: an unusual attribute'.⁴⁸ From the leadership of the older generation on Jewish ministers in Thatcher's cabinet, there was the notorious remark (attributed to Harold Macmillan) that there were 'more Estonians than Etonians'.⁴⁹ Yet, for all Thatcher's philosemitism, and like dominant trends among New Testament scholars and in Anglo-American politics and culture more generally, a note of difference and superiority remained. As we saw, for instance, she was clear that she did not equate Judaism and Christianity and that the Old Testament could only be understood in light of the New Testament and its message of mercy.

Vermes' major point that Jesus was a Jew and was very different from the Christ of faith is certainly reflected in *Life of Brian* (released only six years after the publication of *Jesus the Jew*) and the popularity of such ideas were partly a product of shifting attitudes towards Judaism, Israel, and multiculturalism. Such shifting attitudes even had a more direct impact on the making of *Life of Brian*. One character who did not make the final cut was the Jewish revolutionary, Otto (pp. 74-75). Otto had hopes for a thousand-year, racially purified, Jewish state ('ridding [Israel] of the scum of non-Jewish people, making it pure, no foreigners, no gypsies, no riff-raff') with the film due to show his Star of David

47. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

48. Lawson, *The View from No. 11*, p. 256.

49. A. Connor, 'Top of the class', *BBC News* (October 17, 2005), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4349324.stm>.

morphing into a swastika. Otto's character was withdrawn for obvious political, cultural and personal reasons.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, there is also evidence of constructed difference, or downplaying of Jewish difference, in that Brian retains a little Gentile-ness for the audience, or at least Brian is not entirely alien to a Gentile audience, or indeed British or English audiences. His forename and those of his mother and others in the film were hardly distinctively Semitic and were common English names.⁵¹ And he is, of course, the bastard son of a Roman soldier in a move that provides a link with the coded British imperial past while simultaneously complicating and questioning the connection. As Mandy warned a stunned Brian while explaining why his nose is the shape it is: don't forget you really are a Roman (p. 19).

7. A Brian for His Times

Like Thatcher herself, *Life of Brian* was a culturally popular critique of post-war consensuses. But *Life of Brian*, like the roughly contemporaneous punk movement, is hardly ideologically pure Thatcherism and its cultural provocation was clearly out-of-step with Thatcher's morally upright, good Christian housewife, Mary Whitehouse-style, 'Tory woman' image of the 1970s.⁵² Individual Pythons may well be horrified – arguably rightly so – with the idea that the central message of individualism and the punk-like thinking for yourself could be deemed compatible with Thatcherism. But at the same time, all those who voted for Thatcher were not necessarily in agreement with everything Thatcher believed and promoted. Clearly, the famous statistic that only 39% of union members voted Labour in the 1983 General Election (32% Conservative and 28% Liberal/SDP) says something about the appeals, tensions, and contradictions involved in voting generally and in voting for Thatcher in 1983.⁵³ And nor was there a precise ideological match between Thatcher and champagne-guzzling yuppies, celebrity entrepreneurs, or Duran Duran, all of whom were obviously products of Thatcherism, irrespective of whether Thatcher would have approved of the video for 'Girls on Film'.

50. Sellers, *Bright Side*, p. 14.

51. Davies, 'Research', pp. 150.

52. Nunn, *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy*, pp. 26-63; Filby, 'God and Mrs Thatcher', pp. 142-45, 185-87.

53. R. Hague, 'Confrontation, Incorporation and Exclusion: British Trade Unions in Collectivist and Post-Collectivist Politics', in H. Berrington (ed.), *Change in British Politics* (London: Cass, 1984), pp. 127-59 (149); A.L. Booth, *The Economics of the Trade Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 28.

But, as we saw in Chapter 1, what we are dealing with are matters of significant overlap and how disparate ideological phenomena can be unconsciously brought together or harnessed as part of broader social and cultural change in an age of neoliberalism. As David Harvey summarised this post-1968 tension: ‘By capturing ideals of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory processes of the state, capitalist class interests could hope to protect and even restore their position’.⁵⁴ And for all its secular humanist values and liberal-leftist writers, *Life of Brian* did lampoon the trade unions, as well as right-wing loudmouths, and did advocate a form of individualism in the dying embers of revolutionary ideals. By analogy, we might note that many – though certainly not all – of the ideas surrounding the historical Jesus and applied to Brian in the film have been accepted by some critically minded members of the various Christian churches. Indeed, a good sign of its ideological significance in the late twentieth century is that it may once have been banned but it now finds itself non-controversially at the top of ‘most popular comedy film’ lists.⁵⁵ As Carl Dyke points out via Gramsci and the usual Christ–Brian distinction, *Life of Brian* may not, after all, be as counter-hegemonic as some, like Dyke’s younger self, might like to think.⁵⁶

54. Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, p. 42.

55. See e.g. ‘Life of Brian named best comedy’, *BBC News* (January 1, 2006), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4573444.stm>.

56. Dyke, ‘Learning from *The Life of Brian*’, pp. 240–41, 248–50. See also Walsh, ‘Gospel according to Judas’, pp. 49–50.