Crossley, James G. "Conclusion: Why Do Politicians Bother with the Bible?." *Harnessing Chaos: The Bible in English Political Discourse Since 1968*. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014. 277–282. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567659347.0006>>.

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CONCLUSION: WHY DO POLITICIANS BOTHER WITH THE BIBLE?

Throughout this book we have seen how the social upheavals of the 1960s generated both radical and reactionary trends which were harnessed in the shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism, from the post-war consensus to the emergence and consolidation of Thatcherism. Politicised biblical interpretation followed suit and was modified in light of major international political concerns, most notably the Cold War and the War on Terror. One of the other notable features of this period was that the Radical Bible was effectively pushed to the fringes of parliamentary politics or outside parliamentary politics altogether. Thatcher's Bible of individualism, personal responsibility and morality, parliamentary democracy, tolerance, and liberal economics was effectively endorsed by Blair who developed a number of Thatcherite emphases in different directions, including issues of tolerance in the direction of social liberalism. The Blair-modified Thatcher Bible is effectively the Bible of the contemporary Conservative-led government and for the more high-profile users of the Bible among the Labour Party. Whether this Bible survives the longer-term impact of the 2008 recession no doubt depends on the fate of neoliberalism but there is no serious indication as yet of major cultural and ideological shifts; on the contrary, neoliberalism and social liberalism remain dominant (but not the only) ideological positions, seemingly embedded in the current generation.

For all the referencing of Alastair Campbell in the press, politicians do 'do God', or at least cite the Bible. Indeed, Nick Spencer has even suggested that there may even be a gradual rise of the use of the Bible in contemporary English politics.¹ But what is clear from a range of figures covered in this book is that the Bible somewhat conveniently coheres broadly (though in a rhetorically non-partisan way) with a given politician's political persuasions, something hardly uncommon in the history of English politics. This is, of course, a broader cultural phenomenon.

1. Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Chapter 11.

Building on the ethnographic work of Brian Malley, Deane Galbraith has pointed out that in the evangelical Christian Bible-reading analysed, issues that are not necessarily even mentioned in the Bible are not only still discussed but answers framed in terms of ‘what the Bible says on the matter’. Galbraith noted that by ‘utilizing the broader concept of “God’s word”, many evangelical Christians are able to pronounce on what the Bible says about even entirely novel issues, such as global warming or stem-cell research’.² This emphasis on the emphases of the reader is crucial for understanding English political discourse.³ That people make the Bible mean whatever they want it to mean probably will not come as a great surprise to readers. Even so, why would an English politician bother using the Bible at all? There is no European-style Christian Democratic party of any note. It is not as if there is a serious block of Bible-loving voters, or even a significant ‘Christian vote’, who might potentially swing an election, even if there is evidence, as Martin Steven has presented, that parties know not to ignore denominational and ‘religious’ votes.⁴ Indeed, we might recall Campbell’s concerns about the British electorate possibly even hating the idea of politicians using the Bible all the time.⁵

Furthermore, politicians who quite clearly do not claim that God or the Bible agrees with their given political party, are likely to be the subject of ridicule for claiming God does support their party, as we saw (Chapter 9) with the press reaction to Steve Webb and the Liberal Democrats who professed to ‘do God’. Why risk press humiliation in navigating too far away from the Safe Bible and towards the Feral Bible? Similarly, it is also clear that there is no danger to a politician to express doubts about faith, before returning to the Bible for support. We have seen this even with the Prime Minister David Cameron. Shirley Williams, one of the most recognisable Christian politicians in the late twentieth century,

2. D. Galbraith, ‘The Author of the Bible Revealed! And it’s you’, *Religion Bulletin* (December 17, 2010), <http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2010/12/the-author-of-the-bible-revealed/>, referring to B. Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004) and B. Malley, ‘Understanding the Bible’s Influence’, in J.S. Bielo (ed.), *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), pp. 194-204.

3. Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Introduction, qualifies the idea that the reader is the author of the book but is likewise aware of the complexity of the wide-range of political issues in the Bible and the significance of the cultural context of the political reader.

4. Steven, *Christianity and Party Politics*, pp. 36-64.

5. Campbell, *The Blair Years*, pp. 111-12.

could even reflect that ‘I am, however, a person of my times, and therefore in this secular society, beset by doubt. Of all the apostles, the one I find most congenial is St Thomas. They called him “doubting Thomas”’.⁶ Yet it is notable that Williams, like Cameron, still turned to the Bible to defend principles deemed culturally important. So why have politicians in the UK used the Bible?

One obvious reason which partly explains uses by Blair in particular is that a given politician is a dedicated Christian for whom the Bible has had a central role in their life. But this does not explain plenty of other political figures such as Cameron or arguably even Powell. Another reason might be inherited language. Knowledge of specific biblical passages may indeed not be what it was in the seventeenth century but the Bible is deeply embedded in the history of parliamentary politics and British European history more broadly. It is no surprise that vestiges of this language remain today, even if the 1960s represented a dramatic change in the influence of the Church, a sharp decline in church attendance, and the decline of a quasi-Protestant form of biblical literacy. Indeed, the two political parties of the past 40 years have historic traditions of Bible-use and significant Christian influences, whether Tory Anglicanism or Labour Nonconformism, in addition to Liberal Nonconformism. Again, it is no surprise that vestiges of such party traditions remain.

There are more local reasons still. The Bible might be used to gain, or at least not lose, the support of different constituencies, in the way that Thatcher did in attracting strands of morally conservative Christianity in the 1970s. There might not be a significant enough voting constituency which appreciates Bible references but there is presumably no harm in trying to keep them – or indeed Christian lobbyists⁷ – happy with vague references and allusions that will not alienate those less impressed. Use of the Bible might also function as a means to keep the peace with church groups or Bishops in the House of Lords, or indeed as a sop to disgruntled elements of a given party. In the case of Blair, we saw that he employed the language of the Radical Bible, or at least biblical language at the heart of the Labour movement’s history, to try and convince a sceptical party of the case for the invasion of Iraq. In the case of the Tories and their supporters in the media, there continues to be an element in the party dedicated to issues of ‘traditional’ morality and Christianity (and with some notably high-profile conversions to Catholicism in

6. S. Williams, *God and Caesar: Personal Reflections on Politics and Religion* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 21.

7. On which see further, Steven, *Christianity and Party Politics*, pp. 105–20.

protest at the apparent Anglican ‘liberalism’).⁸ Moreover, a well-placed use of the Bible might even gain a potentially positive mention from the often hostile right-wing press. Despite Blair being a Bible-user, the *Daily Mail* reported Gordon Brown’s speech at St Paul’s Cathedral in 2009 as ‘an extraordinary break from his predecessor Tony Blair, whose spin doctor Alastair Campbell famously declared that “we don’t do God”’ and ran with the headline, ‘Brown DOES do God as he calls for new world order in sermon at St Paul’s’.⁹ Similarly, and despite the more extensive Christian rhetoric and speeches of Thatcher, the *Telegraph* claimed that ‘David Cameron adopted the most overtly Christian tone of any prime minister in recent memory with a Christmas address speaking of faith giving hope to “countless millions”’.¹⁰ The *Daily Mail* likewise reported the same story with a similar opening line (‘David Cameron offered an olive branch to Christians last night, issuing the most overtly religious Christmas message by a prime minister in recent times’) but interpreted it further in the headline in light of a particularly controversial issue for contemporary Conservatism: ‘PM’s Christmas bid to calm Christian anger at gay marriage: David Cameron quotes Gospel of St John in annual message’.¹¹

The Bible may also represent some kind of implicit or explicit authority for a politician or political position, which partly explains why the Cultural Bible appears across the political spectrum. Recalling a story and debate from his early career as a biblical scholar at the beginning of his book on the Bible in American politics, Jacques Berlinerblau wrote about ‘the most profound insight I have ever absorbed about my subject matter’, a lesson learned from a highly respected (and anonymous) European professor: ‘Don’t you understand, the Bible in and of itself is neither good nor evil. It can be used for both. It says everything. It says nothing. The Bible is just raw power!’¹² This ‘raw power’ is more-or-less equivalent to what Galbraith, via Malley, picked up on in his analysis of the Bible being utilised to answer issues not in its contents: ‘this concept of “God’s word” becomes “a placeholder in a community’s authoritative discourse” including but not limited to the actual content of the Bible’.¹³

8. Filby, ‘God and Mrs Thatcher’, pp. 218-33; Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Chapter 11; Steven, *Christianity and Party Politics*, pp. 121-38.

9. J. Chapman, ‘Brown DOES do God as he calls for new world order in sermon at St Paul’s’, *Daily Mail* (April 1, 2009).

10. Bingham, ‘Cameron’s olive branch’.

11. Shipman, ‘PM’s Christmas bid’.

12. Berlinerblau, *Thumpin’ It*, p. 2.

13. Galbraith, ‘Author of the Bible revealed!’

We can even see reference to this authoritative ‘power’ in interpreters of political uses of the Bible in the English tradition and representing different political perspectives. From a Marxist perspective, Roland Boer saw the revolutionary power of the Bible and Christianity in his analysis of E.P. Thompson and has framed it in terms of ‘myth’: ‘Any political movement needs its fables, or political myths as I prefer to call them... In drawing upon this stock of images, symbols and stories in order to bring out their radical possibilities, Thompson has managed to recover these stories in the form of political myth.’¹⁴ Connecting ideas such as tolerance with political readings of the Bible, Spencer similarly argued that ‘all politics rests on wider myths’.¹⁵ But Spencer’s myth appears to be tied in with a preference for liberal parliamentary democracy:

it is a paradox of the role of the Bible in British political history that so many utterly self-confident and determined pronouncements on the imperative of either political order or political freedom should result in a cumulative tradition that is agonistic and hesitant: freedom *and* order, both necessary and irreconcilable. It is this cumulative, agonistic understanding of human politics that is perhaps the Bible’s greatest gift to our national political tradition... [I]t is a message we could do well to recapture.¹⁶

Despite their differing commitments, Boer and Spencer both share the assumption of the Bible as a powerful political force.¹⁷ But what actual grounding do these myths have? What we may be seeing here, particularly with the appeal to ‘myth’, is an idea of an unseen authority which underpins, has guided, and might continue to guide, political systems. In many ways this has similarities with the idea of ‘spiritual’ readings of the Bible, the appeal to something beyond the literal meaning, even an implicit appeal to something transcendent which is unlikely ever to be

14. Boer, ‘Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism’, p. 41. See also Boer, *Political Myth*.

15. Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Postscript.

16. Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Introduction. We might add that even when Spencer discusses the ‘weight’ of biblical language, he is still working with the idea of the Bible-as-raw-power: ‘...there is a positive argument for deploying the Bible rhetorically in debate, as long as it is done with care and attention. As many politicians instinctively recognise, such usage can lend political speechmaking weight that it often desperately needs’ (Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Postscript).

17. The language of the power of the Bible is found in political discourse occasionally. For instance, Tony Benn: ‘Tyndale for his pains was strangled and burned for heresy. Now what was it that was so powerful about the Bible that a man could be strangled and burned for turning it into an intelligible language for the English people? Can anyone really doubt its power?’ Benn, ‘The Power of the Bible Today’, p. 6.

mentioned explicitly in mainstream parliamentary English politics.¹⁸ At this point we are starting to get into broader questions concerning the reception history of the Bible, and assumptions of a guiding third party alongside the reader and the text, which are beyond the scope of a study such as this. But at the very least specific studies such as this one can illuminate ways in which the Bible continues to survive in cultural contexts after the 1960s.

18. I owe this point to a discussion with Deane Galbraith.