

God and Mrs Thatcher

Eliza Filby, *God and Mrs Thatcher: the Battle for Britain's Soul*
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BRITISH VALUES are now legally enforceable to the point of breaking up families. “Civil courts increasingly take action when children are exposed to radical ideas within their families.” (*The Times*, 27 July 2015, p. 10) What is unacceptable about “radical ideas” or the “risk of indoctrination” if not that the ideas and doctrines are unBritish? So it is desirable to know what British values are.

In 2015, after a general election in which it was very hard to discover what if anything any of the establishment parties stood for, the great search for British Values is on (see column 116 on this website). There once were such things, we assume, but

I speke of manye hundred yeres ago,
But now can no man see no values mo.

Nor have we even any longer holy friars as thick as motes in the sunbeam. Instead we have politicians.

In every bush or under every tree
Ther is noon other incubus but he

and s/he would dearly love to tell us what British values are, if only they could be discovered.

Voters for either Labour or the Conservatives in the 1980s, in contrast, had a reasonably clear idea of what they were voting for, and the electorate's approval of the latter was registered in successive Conservative victories. There was little doubt about what the then Prime Minister understood by “British values” though it was not one of her phrases, and not the same as the understanding of some senior figures in her party or, it is said, of Her Majesty the Queen.

The main theme of *God and Mrs Thatcher* is the lifelong Christian presuppositions of the late Prime Minister as shaped by her Methodist upbringing. In considering this, the present reviewer has what is potentially a not very common advantage. I too was

born and bred in a seriously Methodist family, in a market town in the East Midlands. My parents did not preach, and had no role in local government, but they were seriously involved in the life of the chapel as Sunday-school teachers, youth-group leaders, in the weekly prayer meeting . . . and my normal Sunday as a child included three trips of more than a mile, on foot or bicycle, to morning service, afternoon Sunday School and evening service. My elder brother was only four years younger than Margaret Roberts. So I knew the Northern kind of Methodism from the inside, a few years later than when she was growing up above the grocer's shop and in the Finkin Street chapel.

Dr Filby has tried hard with research and interviews to get into that world but, naturally, sometimes gets things wrong. "Methodism was always closely aligned with the Church of England, modelling its worship on the Book of Common Prayer." (p.10) No: the ordinary Sunday service I knew had no set prayers at all: the main (extempore) prayer came early in the service. Saints days and the lesser festivals were not observed. We did share with the Morning and Evening Prayer and Holy Communion of the Church of England two Bible lessons, always from the Authorised Version. The caption to the photo of the interior of Finkin Street Chapel is better: "All eyes are focused on the pulpit and the organ for the source of Methodist worship: the sermon and the hymnody." (But here "centre" would have been better than "source".) Also, Margaret Roberts preached, but to call her a lay preacher, as Dr Filby steadily does, (p. 5 onwards) is to use an Anglicanism. The Methodists would have called her a "local preacher" (as distinct from the itinerant ministry)—if she was. But whether Miss Roberts had been approved to preach and to be called on by the circuit planners we are not told. (Perhaps she was a member of a Mission Band which needed no formal authorisation?)

Whichever way, she continued to take the Church seriously at Oxford and beyond, and throughout her years in power she saw things from a point of view not only Christian but with the Christianity of one kind of Nonconformist, though by that time she was often worshipping with the Church of England.

Dr Filby is a good enough Collingwoodian historian to be able to give something of the consequent story of Mrs Thatcher's premier-

ship, to show how problems and questions appeared to a Nonconformist mind, and how that affected policy and action. But the book is a strange mixture. There are historical howlers. The second 1974 election is said to have been the worst for the Conservatives since 1918 (p. 97): Wikipedia disagrees and says the Conservatives *gained* 108 in 1918; in any case Dr Filby has forgotten the Labour landslide of 1945. She thinks Christianity has been in England for less than a thousand years (p. 234)—as if it is somehow a by-product of the Norman Conquest? In 1982 Pope John Paul II made “the first visit by a reigning Pope since the Reformation”. (p. 280) What Pope visited these shores *before* the Reformation?

A more serious fault is that Dr Filby belongs to the Doolittle generation and her mastery of English prose is shaky. (A catalogue of some of the Doolittlisms is appended at the end of this review.) This is not distinct from the unreliability and, it has to be said, the occasional stupidity of her historical judgements, which can be far too facile. It is as if she misunderstands her own narrative. She often makes crude snap judgements in phrases like “Cold War paranoia” (p. 269). Was the fear of each other by both sides in the Cold War irrational? The whole rationale of cold war as maintainer of peace depended on it. Or does Dr Filby just not know what *paranoia* means?—the word is again misused (p. 283) when we are told of “the level of paranoia in Whitehall” over the Pope’s visit.

Insecure literacy and unsound judgement lead to one another in both directions. No support is given for the use of the word *hysteria* in “The source of the initial hysteria” (p. 215, about the Act “which outlawed the promotion of homosexuality in schools”) and on the same page, at the 1987 Conservative Party conference Thatcher “repeated scare stories . . . as the Tory faithful clapped in hysterical jubilation.” Clapping cannot express anything hysterical. “More than any British leader since Churchill, Thatcher was willing to elevate the Cold War into one about ideas and values. ‘I’m perfectly prepared to fight that battle,’ Thatcher said in enthusing tones” (p. 276) Did she not just say it? The question may distract attention from the perhaps more important one, why ideas and values are assumed to be higher than, for instance, territorial integrity—which, in the Falklands, Mrs Thatcher showed she was ready to defend.

“On the matter of trade, Margaret Thatcher also seemed unprepared to concede the distinctly ‘unfree’ and unfair of [*sic*] nature of the existing trade arrangements between developed and developing countries.” (p. 298) This begs the question whether there is anything to concede, whether in fact trade is unfair. The sentence follows one beginning “Tellingly, she never felt the need . . .”—floating adverb designed to beg a related question. Here is a whole paragraph:

Margaret Thatcher’s linguistic style though always went down better with the Americans than it did back home. Labour’s shadow Foreign Secretary Denis Healey thought Thatcher “an ignorant and opinionated demagogue”, while *The Guardian* served up a fearful assessment: “There is not just Churchill in her rhetoric; there is Harry before Agincourt, even Richard the Lionheart, setting out for the Holy War with Saladin.” (p. 277)

Are Denis Healey and *The Guardian* then fully representative of British opinion? and what quite does “fearful assessment” do for characterising what *The Guardian* says? Are the three people mentioned automatically “fearful” (whatever quite was intended by that word)? “Clergymen may have been chosen as the figureheads of the Miners’ Hardship Fund in 1984, but it would be celebrities who would subsequently take up the cross.” (p. 301) *Take up the cross*?! Does she mean *raise the banner*? or *what* does she mean?

“If there is one scriptural certainty, it is that biblical interpretation is elastic and can be moulded to justify whatever one wishes to endorse . . .” (p. xix) *Whatever, sic*. Could the New Testament, for instance, be “moulded” to justify an Islamic-style *jihad*? What in the Bible could be “moulded” to justify avarice, the oppression of the poor, atheism, pride, adultery or idolatry?

So Dr Filby has a surprising mixture of understanding of Mrs Thatcher’s way of thinking and its relation to her education in Methodism and a fairly coarse incomprehension of the very same things.

“For us, it was rather a sin to enjoy yourself by entertainment. . . . Life was not to enjoy ourselves. Life was to work and do things,” Margaret Thatcher later pondered, evoking a childhood frustration for what must have been a stifling upbringing. (p. 9)

But Dr Filby shows and seems to understand that it was not a stifling upbringing! Our contemporary bishops are attached to the word *flourishing*. (See Column 114 on this website.) Dr Filby's account shows the young Margaret Roberts flourishing. Is the world of the next century, in which entertainment is taken for granted twenty-four hours a day, less stifling? Not that provincial Nonconformity in the time of Miss Roberts and earlier was quite the same as the Kingdom of Heaven. It had its narrownesses. (Methodists were supposed, despite the Biblical "wine that maketh glad the heart of man" and our Lord's reputation as a winebibber, to be teetotal, as the Robertses were, so one Methodist quandary was what to do about communion wine. A dear Aunt of mine had, as Society Steward, to find non-alcoholic wine.) Dr Filby can't escape from twenty-first century mass-media "values" despite being a good enough historian to show they are unable to comprehend the realities she is narrating. She is at once out of and stuck in the modern world of (in shorthand) pop = entertainment and pleasure as the ends of human life. So Margaret Roberts *must* have wanted to escape from Grantham and have a good time. "Thatcher may have eulogised Grantham later in life but as a teenager she probably had a better understanding of what it really was: a dull, stifling environment one wanted to escape from." (p. 44) Note *really*: the historian knows, even if she has just demonstrated the contrary. By the standards of the swinging sixties onwards Grantham no doubt was dull and stifling. "Denis undoubtedly offered the prospect of a more exciting life." (p. 62) But there were and perhaps still are people who do not accept excitement as the be-all and the end-all here.

Also like the present reviewer Margaret Roberts went through the local state school to one of the ancient universities. (There is hardly anything about her school in Dr Filby's account.) Was Oxford just an escape from a dull stifling environment? Margaret Roberts was born ten years after the publication (and suppression) of *The Rainbow*. I suggest that the getting away from Grantham had something in common with the aspirations of the Brangwen women, and of that other Midlands nonconformist, Lawrence himself, to "set out to discover what was beyond, to enlarge their own scope and range and freedom . . ." (*The Rainbow* chapter 1, "How Tom Brangwen married a Polish Lady") It used to be called

education and was not a contradiction of the culture of home. The ordinary career-path of the newly educated was teaching in state schools, that is, bringing what was “beyond” back for anybody who could enter in to it. Dr Filby calls the social life of Oxford “infamous” but it was possible in those days to find education there as well as parties.

Dr Filby herself shows Methodism as not only a serious way of life but one capable of providing one understanding (however challengeable) of the common good. This book really gives some of the essential recent history of this country, but sometimes the reader has to get there by contradicting the author.

Mrs Thatcher was well aware that her political position—based on morality and religion—had more in common with Victorian Liberalism than the historic Toryism of her party. Of course the Nonconformist sects were the backbone of the Liberal Party, though the Wesleyans, not quite Nonconformist, were the exception and are sometimes credited or blamed for the nation’s avoidance of revolution in the 1840s. The well-known Thatcherite difficulty, giving particular trouble to a government, is to see how belief in the individuality of human life does not contradict community—how, in fact, there is never the one without the other, if only in the very basic human fact of language. Mrs Thatcher, appointed to govern the nation, was surely right to insist that the nation is composed of human beings one at a time, but she got into some difficulties by not seeing that “the common good” cannot always be understood by concentrating on individuals. The Falklands campaign (about which she was clear-minded) was not *only* for the sake of the small number of our individual fellow-countrymen living there, it was for the sake of the nation.

THIS DILEMMA of Mrs Thatcher’s derived, I think, from her kind of Christianity, with its emphasis on individual conversions. Only individuals can be saved, one at a time: but then salvation is the entry into the Body of Christ. At the present day the Barnabas Fund, which is doing very good work helping persecuted Christians (see column 58 on this website) often reports the Church in far-away places in percentage terms. Even if the percentage of Christians is very high the society is not always Christian. (South Sudan, for

instance.) The Church of England must represent Christianity in England however many or few communicants it has, and whatever individually they think.

Dr Filby blames Thatcher both for what she sees as the moral failures within Thatcherism and for the moral failure of her policies. Thatcher hoped that solid reliable prosperity would lead to (in a word) a more charitable society, whereas in fact it led to a debt-laden populace intent on acquisition and dependent for its prosperity on an immoral financial “industry”. One of the most surprising mistakes is that Dr Filby attributes to Thatcher a belief in “the inherent virtue of man” (p. 348) and goes on, “When she said there was ‘no such thing as society’, it was not a negative or flippant statement but an optimistic rallying cry for individual moral responsibility to oneself and to one another.” Rather, it was a recognition that responsibility—to God, not ourselves—is by its nature an individual matter; the optimism came with any expectation there may have been that individual Christians with a due sense of the use of riches would predominate. But . . . “the inherent virtue of man”? If Margaret Thatcher was at heart a Methodist she certainly believed in original sin. Whatever inherent virtue we have is ruined by the Fall, for which the only remedy is redemption, and in the great Arminian vision of the Methodists, “For all, for all my Saviour died.” John Wesley somewhere observes that when people are converted they give up their vicious ways of drunkenness, profligacy with money, etc., become sober citizens—and are then in danger of succumbing to love of the things of this world. Thatcher’s hope was that the individuals of this nation would in sufficient numbers accept saving grace without later transferring their faith to an enhanced “standard of living”. She might be judged optimistic, but can hardly be blamed if the people accepted the goods but at the same time rejected the good. That is their responsibility. If anybody is to blame for that it is the Church for losing its own thread and not making clear enough what is good and what is not. (See column 114 on this website.)

“Britain finally became unhinged from its Christian moorings as consumerism became the central source of values and social respectability.” (pp. 343–4) This, however much truth it contains, is pessimistic, and also characteristically over-confident with

“finally”. Who is to say that the long story of this nation in Christendom has now reached its end? One thing that could not be “moulded” out of the Old Testament is the repeated backsliding, apostasy, then repentance and forgiveness of the chosen people. In the New Testament the Church is given the promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. There is no finality in either direction in this world.

If, however, this country is still a Christian country, as the present Prime Minister keeps telling us, the question of values is settled.

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DOOLITLISMS

A SELECT CATALOGUE

INCORRECT VERB FORMS

uncertainty with strong verbs: *begun* for *began* (p. 133); *rung* for *rang* (p. 307)

“thou shall not” (p. 77)

“avowed to a belief” (p. 348) [*avow* takes direct object; perhaps *subscribed* was intended?]

“Yet one need only to name” (p. 349) [*name* is indeed an infinitive but English idiom here uses the form without *to*.]

UNCERTAINTY WITH PREPOSITIONS

“helping to bringing” (p. 276) (*either* help with bringing *or* helping to bring)

“preoccupation . . . on” (p. 219, should be *with*)

“same . . . of” (p. 148; *as*)

“War of Terror” for “War on Terror” (p. 329) (It makes a difference!)

“admiring of” (p. 252)

and of course the estate agents’ favourite “comprising of” (p. 286) (*comprise* too takes a direct object.)

CONFUSION OF SINGULAR AND PLURAL

“a millennia” (p. 234)

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT FORM OF THIRD-PERSON PRONOUN

nervous *whom* for *who* (p. 124)

ANACOLUTHON

“With a society orientated towards consumption, so greater sexual liberation . . . was an inevitable by-product.” (p. 219)

“. . . with the religious hysteria on display seemed out of sync” (p. 260) *seemed* / *seeming* (or preferably bin the sentence).

UNIDIOMATIC IDIOM

“not for good reason” = “not without good reason”(?) (p. 98)

“. . . both he and Friedman espoused to what may be called an atheist libertarian position.” (p. 93) *espoused to* either *subscribed to* or *were espoused to* or *espoused*.

“unhinged from moorings” (p. 343)

“carved on the roll call of mayors” (p. 31) Not a roll *call*: nobody could answer.

SOLECISMS

“attendees [at Finkin Street Film club] had to endure a sermon and hymns.” (p. 38) *attendee* is one attended, as an employee is one employed. (By the way Methodists used actually to enjoy singing hymns. I have heard a Cathedral choirmaster exhort the congregation to “sing like Methodists”.) *exceeds* for *excels* in “The nation exceeds at spiritual pageantry” (p. 320)

“the perception of London as the metropole” (for *metropolis*) (p. 290: may be serendipitous if the vibrant city is thought of as a king-size hotel?)

“ultimate prerogative” = “first priority” (p. 226)

prejudicial *possibly for* prejudiced (p. 44)

referenced *should be* quoted (p. 340)

infamous: “the infamous commemoration balls” at Oxford (p. 45). Here the wrong word is also meant to express a dubious judgement. She means *notorious* but what is wrong with the commemoration balls? The misuse (and misjudgement) is consistent, e.g. “. . . Tony Benn fought an infamously close fight with Denis Healey” (p. 183) “. . . her infamous ‘Iron Lady’ speech” (p. 275) And what was wrong with “her infamous speech against European federalism in Bruges”? (p. 280: *in*, also, should be *at*. The federalism is not particularly in Bruges.)

inception for *invention* or *innovation* (p. 283, where we are told that Rome “considered the Church of England a blasphemous inception”: *blasphemous* could also be questioned).

sometimes outright MALAPROPISMS

contingency for *constituency* or possibly a misused *contingent* (p. 251)

“Politics, like theology, he pertained, should not” (p. 192) I cannot correct this because I cannot guess what was intended. As the “he” is Bishop Jenkins of Durham perhaps this is not inappropriate?

This writer, well-informed about English ecclesiastical matters, nevertheless uses *evangelicalism* when she means *evangelism* (p. 300 and again p. 319 where she is misquoting the name of the “decade of evangelism”). She ought also to know that *proselyte* is a noun not a verb, so that *proselyted* is impossible (p. 334) unless perhaps in the way I have heard my Grandmother use *pope* as an intransitive verb, in “He’s popped.” In any case at the place cited Dr Filby just means *preached*: “those Nonconformist virtues that Thatcher so fervently proselyted”.

Yield printed when *wield* must have been intended (p. 319) may just be a typo, for the book needed more proof-reading, as when the author forgot to delete a reminder to herself to *check* a name (p. 309).

Sometimes the total effect is pretty near pidgin.

Writing to Thatcher in 1980, South African Prime Minister Botha offered to dispel what he considered to be some of the myths surrounding the apartheid system, while also position his government’s ideological alignment with Western democracy
(p. 293)

Occasionally it is not possible to have more than a good guess at what is meant. “Lambeth Palace referred the matter to a diocesan vote, which thirty-two rejected and twelve accepted. Bishops therefore could consent to clergy remarrying divorcees, but no clergyman could be forced to marry a couple against their will.” (p. 222) What was rejected, the vote or the proposal? and is it the clergyman who cannot be forced to conduct a wedding, or the couple who cannot be married against their will?

“I am also grateful to Ben Wright for nudging me out of my academic mindset and Hugh Dougherty for making my words palatable for popular print.” (Acknowledgements, p. 395, in which Dr Filby also reports that she “limped over the final hurdle”, quite a contortion!) Perhaps then it is all their fault, though this phrase itself, presumably the author’s is objectionable. It is the readers not the print that demand palatability (if they do), here taking the form of excessive alliteration. But perhaps Dr Filby would have done better unnudged?

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