

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF ECONOMICS

God and Mrs. Thatcher: The Battle for Britain's Soul

Eliza Filby

London, United Kingdom: Biteback Publishing, 2015 (407 pages)

Eliza Filby has written an intelligent, insightful, and pacey account of the relationship between Margaret Thatcher and the Church of England. The book seeks, as others have done, to relate Mrs. Thatcher's views and policies to her Methodist upbringing. The author paints an authentic and revealing picture of religious, social, and political life in Grantham, where Miss Margaret Roberts grew up and where her father deliberately and successfully shaped his precocious daughter's tastes and outlook. The uniqueness and special merit of the study lie in its portrayal of the ideological confrontation between the Thatcher government and the Anglican establishment, set against the backcloth of longer-term trends in British politics and religion.

Filby is most persuasive when she analyzes the Church of England, on which she is an expert. She is less well informed when she tries to come to grips with the Conservative Party. Through no fault of her own—because (unlike this reviewer) she did not have the opportunity to discuss religion or anything else with Mrs. Thatcher—Filby draws some wrong conclusions about her subject's outlook. Finally, and in this case culpably but not unusually so, Filby makes as little attempt to grasp the theory, practice, and effects of Thatcherite economics as did Thatcher's Anglican critics in the 1980s.

Filby is correct in observing that the Anglican Church became more political (and Left wing) at broadly the same juncture at which the Conservative Party became more religious (and Right wing). This development inevitably sharpened the clash between the two. It was not primarily the result of the views of the Archbishop of Canterbury of

the day, Robert Runcie, a contemporary of Margaret Roberts at Oxford University but never a friend. Runcie was, indeed, an insubstantial, foppish figure, with a strong sense of social guilt and a characteristically Anglican propensity for consensus. The clash was to a much greater extent the result of the unusual approach taken by Margaret Thatcher to Conservative Party politics.

Thatcher often spoke in the terms, if not the tone, of a revivalist preacher. She repeatedly talked of “beliefs” and “convictions.” This zeal disorientated many of her colleagues and frightened the life out of most of her enemies. She had, in particular, no hesitation in claiming the moral high ground for her policies. On several occasions, none of which can be judged a success, she even took to the pulpit to take issue with those who challenged the rightness of her approach on grounds of Christian principle. This approach she certainly picked up from her father, a Methodist lay preacher. It suited her temperament, which was naturally combative. To some extent, it also simply reflected defiance.

Filby is correct in analyzing Thatcher’s disputes with her Church critics in terms of a radical clash between the individualist and the collectivist trends in Christian thinking—one that is often more a matter of temperament than of theological perspective. (This is worth emphasizing because Margaret Thatcher, like most Methodists, had no theological differences with Anglicanism, into whose ranks she drifted after her marriage, albeit as a noncommunicant member.) But Filby, in pursuit of her theses, seems to this reviewer to go too far.

The first corrective is that Margaret Thatcher’s rhetoric, though apparently simplistic, was usually cleverly pitched. Indeed, Thatcher was a very astute, as well as an intuitive, politician. While she was moral and honest, she was not, in truth, especially religious. She was not straitlaced. She liked the sound of the King James Bible, but she abhorred pieties in private or public speech. She was a Christian believer, and she most probably said her prayers. However, her attitude to religion was traditionally English: It was a private matter, in which doctrine and devotion were subordinate to duty.

This is important because—*pace* the subtitle of Filby’s book—Thatcher, even though she might have used such overwrought language on occasion, did not believe that she was engaged in a “battle for Britain’s soul.” Souls she left to the Creator. She, herself, was primarily interested in economics. For her, economics was not a desiccated science. Getting the economics right involved the use of psychological, not just technical, methods. The basis of “Thatcherism” was readjusting, in what turned out to be a painful and often problematic manner, the balance between the state and private enterprise, the collective and the individual, so as to restore Britain’s economic fortunes.

This program had little or nothing to do with theology. She was in full agreement with thinkers and colleagues who had little or no religious faith. Indeed, if one were to describe the common outlook of the Tory economic liberals—not, incidentally, “libertarians,” let alone “neoliberals,” anachronistic terms that Filby casually misapplies—it would be one of skepticism. It was the Scottish Enlightenment, not Gladstonian righteousness, that provided the dominant mindset.

What exasperated Mrs. Thatcher was that the Church of England, by stubbornly refusing to listen to the arguments or even observing what was wrong, made a difficult task more difficult still. Clerical Luddism was what riled her. In this indignation, she was joined by the great majority of the Parliamentary Conservative Party. They were not necessarily altogether convinced by her economic prescriptions either. Nevertheless, they thought that the Church of England should keep out of politics, and they suspected—and sometimes said—that the bishops’ enthusiasm for debate about the things of this world reflected a loss of conviction about the next. This resentment extended beyond the sphere of economics. As Filby notes, one of the most serious disagreements was about the 1982 Service of Thanksgiving for victory in the Falklands War, where many conservatives (and not just conservatives) felt that regret, not gratitude, was what the original Anglican Church proposals suggested.

Eliza Filby is right, however, to focus attention on the Church document *Faith in the City* published in December 1985. This lengthy manifesto for a collectivist economic policy did not merely question or suggest incremental shifts in the government’s approach. It charged that it was immoral. According to Filby, it provided a “detailed portrait of a sinking society, descending under the weight of unemployment, social dilapidation and fragmentation [that] was hard to counter or rebuke [*sic*]” (175). As the tone of this observation illustrates, Filby, unfortunately, demonstrates the same myopia regarding economics (and with less excuse because she enjoys the benefit of hindsight) as did the Church in the 1980s. It was, in fact, from about this juncture that the evidence of the economic turnaround of Britain became undeniable. The benefits of the shake out of overmanning and misused investment became manifest. Healthy, sustainable economic growth resumed. New jobs were created. Unemployment fell sharply from the summer of 1986. Living standards rose. The wealth was created to pay for improvements in health and benefits. As for *Faith in the City*, its anticapitalist program looked so out of date that even the Labour Party abandoned it. (Or at least, it did so until recently.)

Nemesis is a favorite theme of writers, and Filby brings it to bear in her conclusions. Margaret Thatcher, the Grantham Methodist, intent on restoring Christian values to Britain, is thus depicted as a tragic victim of her own economic reforms, whose fissiparous and materialistic impact has since turned Britain into a godless wasteland. According to Filby, “Thatcherism may have laid the foundations for a culture in which individualism and self-reliance could thrive, but, ultimately, it created a culture in which only selfishness and excess were rewarded” (347). There is so much that is questionable and exaggerated in this assessment that it would take a lengthy essay to unpick it. Suffice it to say, that no philosophical conservative with an inherent skepticism about the effectiveness of political intervention, let alone Margaret Thatcher, would ever imagine that politics shaped the fundamentals of society, for good or ill.

Culture is a reflection of values, and values are largely shaped by religion. Politicians can do much harm, but they usually reflect cultures not destroy them. Thatcher’s aims were to revive Britain’s economy and to make Britain safe, respected, and influential. In

these aims, she broadly succeeded. By contrast, the Church of England's aims obviously have not been fulfilled, but that is what happens whenever clerics confuse constructing Utopia with building up God's kingdom. There is a lesson here.

—Robin Harris
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The Economic Ethics of World Religions and Their Laws: An Introduction to Max Weber's Comparative Sociology

Andreas Buss

Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos, 2015 (219 pages)

This new book restates for contemporary readers Max Weber's thesis on the Protestant ethic, stressing how it compares against other world religions. Because almost a century has elapsed since the death of Max Weber in 1920, even though the title of his 1904 essay is still familiar, the contents are fading into memory. Andreas Buss now brings this fascinating period piece back to life for us.

In brief, this book is a summary of Max Weber's views of the social structure of European and Asian societies and of what that meant for the status of wealth. The Protestant ethic famously encouraged the accumulation of wealth while at the same time shunning frivolous consumption or flashy display of riches. The focus was always on saving, or what the author calls "asceticism."

The Protestant Ethic, in the thinking of Max Weber, is his stirring defense of capitalism in the face of Marx's *Das Kapital*, which was shaking Europe to its roots. It was not enough for the purpose to make clear the rectitude of capital; Weber had to argue that it is a moral imperative of sorts on a par with or superior to the great religious beliefs of the world. Capital is not Marxian "Das Kapital"; to twist a phrase, it is for Protestant Europe "Der Kapital," the paternal guide and reward—as it were, the wise father-figure bequeathed to the West in the Protestant Reformation. In pursuing that line of argument, Weber took great care to make the case that the Protestant ethic was the logical precursor of modern capitalism—of the choices that follow from the prescribed moral way of life. Hence, it is not only the Protestant way of life; it is the Protestant *ethic*. Capital is for this purpose both a culture and a divine command. It is a culture of saving—of deferred gratification that Weber calls ascetic—and dedication to the highest level of productivity at work. Economically, capitalism is the logic of intermediate production in the creation of intermediate goods (tools) that facilitate production of final goods. As a commandment, it confirms the sanctity of private property in the biblical Decalogue.

Historically, capitalism seems almost synonymous with indirect production methods that evolved into ever more ingenious technologies and rising productivity, an entire cornucopia of scientific knowledge and practical know-how that transformed lives. We recognize that capital in this sense is a produced good, but it is entirely possible that our capital would instead be a natural endowment, as for example the lush waters around