

4 Thatcherism, morality and religion*

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Look at the scale of the opposing forces. On the one side, the whole of the new establishment with their sharp words and sneers poised. Against them stood this one middle-aged woman. Today her name is a household word, made famous by the very assaults on her by her enemies.¹

The object of Keith Joseph's admiration in this 1974 speech was not Margaret Thatcher, but another 'middle-aged woman', Mary Whitehouse. But Joseph could just as well have been talking about Thatcher. As we shall see, both women identified and amplified disenchantment with the permissive society in the 1970s. Both were populists, presenting themselves as ordinary women taking on an effete or decadent establishment. Both sought to renew Britain as a Christian nation. Each encouraged the other in her endeavours. For Margaret Thatcher, a crisis of values was an important part of the broader crisis she diagnosed in the 1970s, and the remoralisation of society was among the medicines she prescribed. Where she encountered some difficulty was in explaining who or what would drive this remoralisation. Her belief in the inadequacy of state action presented a problem; if the state could not remoralise society, then what could?

The moral and religious dimensions of Thatcherism have been overlooked in existing accounts, which have tended to concentrate on what Thatcherism *achieved*, in terms of concrete policy, rather than on what it *represented*. Because the main policy manifestations of Thatcherism were economic, historians have tended to view it as primarily an

economic phenomenon. Anna Marie Smith bewailed this in her 1994 book on Thatcherism, race and sexuality, but despite the appearance of some very distinguished contributions on Thatcherism since then, economic readings of Thatcherism continue to predominate.²

Of course, it is true that economics *were* central to Thatcherite policy. It is also true that, as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher did little to legislate on morality and the family. The permissive reforms of the 1960s were left intact, and the only Conservative attempts at legislating on morality were Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which banned the promotion of homosexuality in schools, and the clauses of the 1988 Education Reform Act that stipulated the teaching of Christianity in schools (both of which were the result of backbench Lords amendments). But the fact that Thatcher did not legislate to reverse permissiveness does not mean that anti-permissiveness was an unimportant part of her ideology. My argument in this chapter is that there was more to Thatcherism than the laws it enacted; looking at its fruits does not necessarily tell us about its roots. In order to explore its appeal, we need to look at language as well as legislation – at the words Margaret Thatcher and her associates used. We might usefully borrow here from the work of Philip Williamson, who has demonstrated how, in the inter-war period, Stanley Baldwin used his speeches to expound a moralised rhetoric, offering a vision of society that did not necessarily directly correlate with policy.³

Some contemporary commentators on Thatcherism did emphasise its moral dimensions. Stuart Hall argued that it was important to explore 'the moral discourses of Thatcherism ... They are the site for the mobilisation of social identities and, by appropriating them, Thatcherism has put down deep roots in the traditional, conventional social culture of English society.'⁴ Hall also noted the sense of crisis that was so central to Thatcherism, a crisis 'experienced at the popular level in the universal, depoliticised, experiential language of popular morality'.⁵ From a radically different political perspective, Shirley Robin Letwin argued in her book *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* that Thatcherism tapped into 'a distinctive but unidentified British morality'.⁶ David Marquand also emphasised the paradox that Thatcherism was 'at one and the same time a revenge for, and a paradoxical continuation of, the cultural revolution of the 1960s, of the so-called permissive society'.⁷

All these interpretations are suggestive, but all were made close to the events they described. With the benefit of distance (and reader access to Thatcher's public statements), we can pinpoint Thatcherism more precisely as part of a wider reaction against permissiveness in 1970s Britain. Thatcher and her associates were tapping into an existing

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protest against aspects of the permissive society that had emerged at the end of the 1960s, in Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA), in the Black Papers on education, and in the adverse reaction to student disturbances in some universities.⁸ They were also drawing on, and contributing to, a more diffuse anxiety about moral decline that accompanied the economic decline of the 1970s, as well as a rejection of the materialism manifested in high wage demands. What Ferdinand Mount called Thatcher's 'direct, unabashed appeal to morality' was essential to her freshness and attractiveness as a politician in the 1970s.⁹ Later, morality receded somewhat as a theme in Thatcherite rhetoric, but as we shall see, it continued to offer an explanatory framework for Conservative policies after 1979.

Against permissiveness

As an opposition MP in 1967, Margaret Thatcher had voted for two of the most famous pieces of 'permissive' legislation, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act and the Sexual Offences Act (though not for the Divorce Reform Act two years later).¹⁰ At this time, she seems to have followed the distinction drawn by the 1957 Wolfenden Report, and subsequently by the legal philosopher H. L. A. Hart, between public and private morality.¹¹ In her 1995 memoir, Thatcher explained this stance, while also expressing contrition:

Knowing how things turned out, would I have voted differently on any of these matters? I now see that we viewed them too narrowly. As a lawyer and indeed as a politician who believed so strongly in the rule of law, I felt that the prime considerations were that the law should be enforceable and its application fair to those who might run foul of it. But laws also have a symbolic significance; they are signposts to the way society is developing – and the way the legislators of society envisage that it should develop. Moreover, taking all of the 'liberal' reforms of the 1960s together they amount to more than their individual parts. They came to be seen as providing a radically new framework within which the younger generation would be expected to behave.¹²

This emphasis on the 'symbolic significance' of law marked a shift from Hart's position to that espoused by Sir Patrick Devlin in the two men's celebrated controversy over the Wolfenden Report.¹³

But Thatcher had expressed unease at the unintended consequences of the permissive reforms as early as 1970. Asked by the *Finchley Press* the question 'What Lies Ahead in the Seventies?' in January 1970, she listed as the first change that she would like to see – ahead of the conquest of inflation – 'a reversal of the permissive society'.¹⁴ For

Thatcher, the term permissive society had particular connotations. 'I think perhaps its deeper meaning seems to imply to most of us that a certain amount of self-discipline has broken down, that things have gone beyond the usual moderation and that the Permissive Society seems to some extent to be undermining family life and the family as a unit of society', she said on *Women's Hour* in April 1970. She was at pains to separate specific permissive reforms like homosexual and abortion law reform from a more general ambience of licence. In distinguishing between different types of permissiveness, she still espoused Hart's public/private distinction: while *private* behaviour was tolerable, it was its *public* manifestations that were unacceptable, especially where these could influence children. 'Homosexual offences and abortion, of course, are part of the Permissive Society, but only a very small part', she told *Woman's Hour*. 'I think that what the average woman would really mean by it is rather more – a good deal more sexual licence, now, fear of one's children going on drugs. Often how exactly does one guide one's teenage son and daughter as to how they should behave in this kind of society?' She addressed this question as a *woman* and as a *mother*, still quite a novel perspective for a professional politician in 1970. The other aspect of the permissive society singled out for criticism was pornography, and here too she spoke as a parent. 'Many of us parents are really quite worried about the thought of literature, either that comes through the letterbox or which you do see on the newspaper stalls, and this is also a very powerful aspect of the permissive society'.¹⁵

Thatcher's presentation of herself as an ordinary woman in 1970 was strikingly similar to that employed by Mary Whitehouse at the same time. During the 1970 election, the morality campaigner warned in a letter to the main regional papers that:

Many women are deeply concerned about the dangers of the 'permissive society' ... The women's vote could be decisive in this election. Let us make sure that we return to power candidates who will reverse the current trend of permissive legislation and who will revitalise those moral and spiritual values which has [sic] made Britain great in the past.

In her letter Whitehouse also complained about 'the political one-upmanship which keeps the eyes of the electorate fixed on purely material issues'. There was, she warned, 'a far greater danger to the future of our country than the much discussed economic state of the nation': namely, 'the drift towards moral anarchy which is seen in so many areas of our society'.¹⁶

Morality and the 1970s crisis

Whitehouse was not the first person to bewail the fixation of politicians on the material at the expense of the moral. The Conservative politician Angus Maude had already done so in a 1969 book, *The Common Problem*.¹⁷ Significantly, given his later role as one of Thatcher's advisors, he framed his argument in opposition to consensus politics:

The present political 'consensus' derives from the primacy of economics, which has usurped almost the entire field of politics. On the efficient functioning of the economy the *whole* of the 'good life' for the individual is deemed to depend, with the result that what we now call 'government' has become largely pre-occupied with the conditioning or regulation of the economy.¹⁸

Maude's was a lonely Conservative voice in the late 1960s (though it was strangely in tune with the wider counter-culture), but after the Heath government's second defeat in 1974, the contention that the Conservatives had made a mistake by over-emphasising the economic became more compelling. This was the argument Keith Joseph pursued in the October 1974 speech with which this chapter began.¹⁹ 'This economics first approach', he warned, 'has aggravated unhappiness and social conflict.' Instead, he urged that it was 'better to approach the public, who know that economics is not everything, as whole men rather than economic men'. This would involve concentrating on issues like 'respect for other people and for law, the welfare of young people, the state of family life, the moral welfare of all the people, cultural values, public-spiritedness or its lack, national defence, the tone of national life'. It was these issues, he said, which 'are at the centre of the public's concern'. Identifying the family and 'civilised values' as the bases of the nation, Joseph warned that 'if we cannot restore them to health, our nation can be utterly ruined, whatever economic policies we might try to follow, for economics is deeply shaped by values, by the attitude towards work, thrift, ethics, public spirit'. He ended with a call to 'remoralise our national life'.²⁰

At the end of this speech, almost in passing, Joseph made the notorious comments, advocating contraception to prevent working-class girls from breeding, which ended his chances of becoming party leader and paved the way for Margaret Thatcher to challenge Ted Heath. Thatcher was later critical of Joseph's speech, which she felt had been an unhelpful piece of freelancing.²¹ But once she became leader, she continued her mentor's argument that economic recovery was doomed without moral regeneration. 'We believe that man needs more than material things', she told the Conservative Central Council in March 1975, a month

after becoming leader. 'Our aim is to build a flourishing society – not an economic system.' In the same speech, she argued that there had been a concerted attack on traditional virtues. 'For many years there has been a subtle erosion of the essential virtues of the free. Self-reliance has been sneered at as if it were an absurd suburban pretension. Thrift has been denigrated as if it were greed. The desire of parents to choose and to struggle for what they themselves regarded as the best possible education for their children has been scorned.'²²

In the later 1970s, Thatcher developed her theme that permissiveness involved a deliberate attack on traditional morality by intellectuals and the professions. 'Never have our basic values, the Christian values which rest on Hebrew and Hellenic foundations, been so menaced as they are today', she told an audience in Houston, Texas in 1977. 'Family life, the innocence of children, public decency, respect for the law, pride in good work, patriotism, democracy – all are under attack.'²³ Addressing the Scottish Conservatives in May 1978, Thatcher complained that 'we have come through a strange period – a period when traditional and tested values were set aside in favour of sociological theories divorced from experience. Twenty years of social analysis and woolly political theory' had led to a situation where 'the older language of morality and legality, of right and wrong, is conveniently forgotten'.²⁴ Her advisor, Alfred Sherman, ascribed this change in a 1979 memorandum to 'an incoherent philosophy containing Rousseauism, Pelagianism, materialistic determinism, moral relativism ... which ends by rejecting not only the idea of personal responsibility but the idea of good and evil which is inseparable from it'.²⁵ Other Conservatives made a similar charge. Lord Hailsham blamed a '*trahison des clercs*, the moral betrayal by those who ought to be the upholders of the traditional virtues, qualities and institutions'.²⁶

For Thatcher, the intellectuals' betrayal lay in encouraging people to depend on the state, thus reducing their capacity for individual responsibility. Not only could the state not remoralise people, it could actually demoralise them. She developed this theme at length in her St Lawrence Jewry speech in 1978, arguing that there were 'grave moral dangers ... in letting people get away with the idea that they can delegate all their responsibilities to public officials and institutions'. She went on:

Once you give people the idea that all this can be done by the state, and that it is somehow second-best or even degrading to leave it to private people (it is sometimes referred to as 'cold charity') then you will begin to deprive human beings of one of the essential ingredients of humanity – personal responsibility. You will in effect dry up in them the milk of human kindness.²⁷

Thatcher owed this line of argument partly to Maude, who had argued in 1969 that the decline of traditional forms of authority was leaving a dangerous vacuum, into which was coming the impersonal idea of 'society', a sort of 'all-embracing super-family'. Society, said Maude, robbed people of their agency and responsibility, forcing them to conform to an 'imaginary norm'. As a result, 'the bewildered individual, seeking lost authority, certainty and standards, is reduced to social conformism'.²⁸ In her speeches in the 1970s, Thatcher tended to blame the 'state' rather than 'society', but her point was essentially the same, and she later picked up Maude's criticism of society as a meaningless abstraction in her notorious 1987 claim that there was 'no such thing as society'.²⁹

The idea of a moral crisis was an important part of what Colin Hay has called the Thatcherites' 'discursive construction' of crisis in the 1979 election.³⁰ Throughout the campaign, Thatcher deliberately conflated the moral and economic crises, blaming Labour for both. In her adoption speech at Finchley in 1979 she argued that:

economic ills are only half – and possibly in the long run not the more important half – of the lost years of Labour government. Everywhere there has been a loosening of national standards, a weakening of the bonds which hold us together as a people, a decline of manners, of morals, of shared beliefs.

Significantly, given her later association with Victorian values, she insisted that the answer to this decline was 'not an overnight return to what (a little unjustly) people call Victorian discipline', but rather a recognition that 'every one of us has a choice between good and evil from which nothing can absolve us'.³¹ Her election address included a passage, reiterated in several campaign speeches, which also stressed the importance of instilling a sense of right and wrong in the young: 'I want a Britain where children are taught that there is a real and absolute difference between right and wrong, and that there are certain acts which by their very nature are invariably wrong and must be outlawed by society'.³²

Thatcher was not the only party leader in 1979 to exploit the anti-permissive backlash. James Callaghan, who like Thatcher had been brought up as a Nonconformist, had famously promised to 'call a halt to the rising tide of permissiveness' as Home Secretary in 1969. The head of his Policy Unit, Bernard Donoughue, recalled how, soon after becoming Prime Minister in 1976, Callaghan asked him to produce a paper about restoring 'responsible values' to society, and how he had expressed enthusiasm for this as a potential theme for his speeches.³³ Callaghan and Thatcher shared both a morally conservative outlook

and good antennae for trends in public opinion. When Callaghan was likened to Moses by his son-in-law, Peter Jay, Thatcher replied with the famous put-down, 'My message to Moses is this. Keep taking the tablets'.³⁴ At a 1979 campaign rally in Callaghan's own stamping-ground, Cardiff, she claimed the prophetic mantle for herself, declaring that 'the Old Testament prophets didn't go out into the highways saying, "Brothers, I want consensus." They said, "This is my faith and my vision! This is what I passionately believe!" And they preached it'.³⁵

But Thatcher's invocation of religion was more frequent and insistent than Callaghan's. That morality could only come from religion was a stock theme in her speeches at this time; morality without religion, she would say, was like a flower cut off from its roots.³⁶ She also emphasised the Christian origins of national life, telling the Bow Group in May 1978 that:

We cannot claim that our society is entirely a Christian one ... But we are the heirs of a society whose religion and whose way of life has been Christian for century on century. Most of us whether Christian or not are thus inspired directly or indirectly by the absolute value which Christianity – derived in part from the Old Testament and Greek philosophy – gives to the individual soul, and hence to man's innate responsibility for his own actions and omissions, and his duty to treat other men as he would have them treat him.³⁷

A key source for this Christian rhetoric was Alfred Sherman, who wrote speeches for both Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph. On the face of it this was surprising, as Sherman was Jewish, but he believed that many of Britain's economic and social problems were a consequence of the 'de-Christianisation of social and political thought in this country'.³⁸ When he wrote parts of Keith Joseph's ill-fated Birmingham speech, Sherman had been re-reading *Moralise Public Life*, by the inter-war Italian politician-priest, Don Luigi Sturzo.³⁹ When Thatcher became party leader, Sherman encouraged her to talk about her religious faith in a series of speeches and interviews, the most famous of which was her speech at St Lawrence Jewry Church in London in 1978.⁴⁰

Thatcher and her associates were also picking up on the recent activities of pressure groups that sought to defend traditional morality against permissiveness, such as Whitehouse's NVALA, and the Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOL), a predominantly, though not exclusively, evangelical campaign group with which Whitehouse was also associated.⁴¹ In 1973, NVALA and NFOL submitted a 1,350,000-signature joint petition for public decency to Number 10, which argued that 'moral issues cannot be separated from the other problems which vex the government and the country. The truth, as we see it, is that our

ability as a nation to accept limitations in human desire in the economic sphere is inseparable from our willingness to set limits on "freedom" in the realm of personal morality.⁴² In a similar vein the Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan, broadcast a 'Call to the Nation' in 1975, which argued that economic regeneration had to be accompanied by moral regeneration:

Many are realising that a materialistic answer is no real answer at all. There are moral and spiritual issues at stake. The truth is that we in Britain are without anchors. We are drifting. A common enemy in two world wars drew us together in united action – and we defeated him. Another enemy is at the gates today, and we keep silence.⁴³

Coggan's 'Call' prompted 27,000 letters from the public, some of which were later reproduced in a book. In the introduction, the Archbishop noted that 'I touched a raw nerve when I suggested that the individual feels that he doesn't count as he should in our mass society. Evidently the frustration in our national life is acute at this point, almost bordering on despair.'⁴⁴ The other concerns that loomed large in the published letters to Coggan were unemployment, inflation, big business, trade unions, bureaucracy, the moral impact of the welfare state and the permissive society. There were close links between the Conservative Party and Coggan's 'Call to the Nation', which had been instigated by two Tory MPs, Michael Alison (an NVALA supporter, and later Thatcher's PPS) and Richard Wood, who had asked for 'a call to prayer and repentance'.⁴⁵ Thatcher quoted several times from Coggan's post-bag in a major speech in 1977.⁴⁶

During the 1979 election, Mary Whitehouse asked the party leaders to reply to four questions on broadcasting, obscenity and religious and sex education. In her reply to Whitehouse, Thatcher promised that she would introduce new legislation on indecency and resist any erosion of the Christian content of religious education, but it was her insistence 'that education about sex should be based on Christian principles' that delighted Whitehouse most. She hailed Thatcher's words as 'one of the most radical statements made during the whole campaign. The implementation of it would revolutionise sex education and indeed the whole quality of human relationships in our society.'⁴⁷ This was tantamount to an NVALA endorsement for the Conservatives, for which Whitehouse was duly rewarded with a CBE in 1980.

How much did Thatcher's invocation of Christian morality actually contribute to her victory in 1979? As Alfred Sherman explained in his memoirs, his attempts to get her to speak about Christianity did not go entirely to plan. When she delivered her address at St Lawrence Jewry,

Things went wrong. The *Daily Telegraph* sent a reporter to cover the speech, but for whatever reason failed to publish it. The *Times* had gone on strike. So the initiative was lost. Mrs Thatcher's colleagues were lukewarm or worse. They preferred leaving religion to the clergy, not noticing that the church had become increasingly hostile.⁴⁸

Certainly there were Conservatives who objected to Thatcher's invocation of religion. When the draft Conservative manifesto for the 1979 election included a quotation from Archbishop William Temple, an official in the Conservative Research Department warned that the reference would be obscure to some and unpopular with those who held the bishops in low esteem.⁴⁹ There was a strong tradition in the Conservative Party of reticence in talking about religion, which Thatcher herself shared, deliberately discussing religion in a measured, rather than fervent, tone. But the distaste of some Conservatives for discussion of religion also reflected an ambiguity within the party about how to react to what they saw as the secularisation of Britain. While some, like Thatcher herself, felt that it was precisely *because* Britain was becoming more secular that it was necessary for the government to keep religious values alive, others argued that the Conservative Party should acknowledge secularisation by avoiding reference to religion. The Conservative historian (and Michael Portillo's old tutor) Maurice Cowling argued in 1978 that de-Christianisation had already gone so far that it was impossible to make religious rhetoric work. 'Today, in spite of a Christian monarchy and an established Church, England is not a Christian country', he argued. 'It is a very long way from being one and will require long-term preparation if it is to become one. Until it gets this ... neither Mrs Thatcher nor anyone else is likely to make Christianity stick politically.'⁵⁰

But appeals to religion and morality *did* fit into Conservative strategy in the late 1970s. They provided a spine that linked different economic and social policies, giving them coherence. Part of the Conservative project in the late 1970s was, as a 1978 Shadow Cabinet memorandum put it, to 'jump the class barrier' and create a cross-class alliance of voters; reviving old discourses of respectability was one way of doing this.⁵¹ In another policy document circulated in 1978, Angus Maude, Norman Tebbit, Nigel Lawson and others had singled out particular 'Themes' that would benefit the Tories. One of these was 'let's return to common sense'. Another theme was 'nostalgia ... for a settled, civilised life ... The change that people want today is much more a change *back* to known standards than a leap forward into the unknown.' A third theme was 'the nation, not the state'. The authors had been inspired by the 'orderliness' and 'unity' of the Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1977,

arguing that 'people passionately welcomed an occasion for national pride and national unity, when both had seemed to be at a discount'.⁵² All three themes could be pursued by appealing to traditional morality and to the idea of a Christian nation. Emphasising the nation's Christian heritage may also have been a discreet way of addressing concerns about immigration. Though Thatcher rarely addressed immigration in opposition, aside from her notorious reference to 'swamping' in 1978, this did not mean that it was absent from her appeal to the electorate.⁵³ Talking about the Christian nation may have carried a subliminal message.

Thatcher also used Christianity as a rhetorical counterpoint to Marxism. Rather as 1920s Conservatives had stigmatised Labour and the trade unions as 'Bolshevist', so Thatcher's 'Marxism' was a conflation of various strains of socialism, statism and 1960s expressive individualism. One way of giving definition to this rather baggy idea of Marxism was to contrast it with Christianity. She wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* in May 1978 that 'the denial of the morality of personal choice, the reduction of history to a predetermined conflict between classes wholly shaped (as Marxists contend) by their role in the economic process – these are an outright denial of the Christian faith'.⁵⁴ Giving the Iain Macleod Memorial Lecture in July 1977, she proclaimed that 'because we see man as a spiritual being, we utterly reject the Marxist view, which gives pride of place to economics'.⁵⁵

Morality and government, 1979–90

'The mission of this government is much more than the promotion of economic progress', the new Prime Minister told the Conservative Political Centre Summer School soon after the 1979 election. 'It is to renew the spirit and the solidarity of the nation.'⁵⁶ As Prime Minister, she continued to use moralised language in her public rhetoric, particularly on the economy. During the 1981 recession she described inflation as 'in my view, a moral issue not just an economic one', and wage restraint as 'a moral responsibility'.⁵⁷ Or, as she told the *Sunday Times* in 1981, 'economics are the method; the object is to change the soul'.⁵⁸ As Raphael Samuel pointed out, her habit of 'translating policy issues into "moral economy"' was 'one of Mrs Thatcher's strengths, and not the least of the reasons why she was able so frequently to wrong-foot her opponents'.⁵⁹

What the Thatcher governments did not do, though, was to reverse any of the permissive legislation of the 1960s. Nor, despite a rhetoric of promoting family values, did they legislate to recreate the traditional

family. True, the Family Policy Group, established in 1982 and largely the brainchild of Ferdinand Mount, sought to promote family life by espousing policies like parental choice in education and the right to buy, but it was never anti-permissive in intent.⁶⁰ Those pieces of family legislation that were passed by the Thatcher government were largely pragmatic rather than ideological, and the government refused the entreaties of pressure groups to legislate against abortion or birth control.⁶¹ Thatcher's reluctance to pass laws to reverse permissiveness was, however, entirely consistent with her belief that 'you cannot make people good by legislation'.⁶² This belief had always set her apart from moralists like Mary Whitehouse, who were sometimes frustrated by Thatcher's refusal to legislate against moral ills.⁶³ Thatcher's own conception of morality was strongly individualised. In a set of notes for her conference speech in October 1979, she reflected that 'morality is personal. There is no such thing as a collective conscience, collective kindness, collective gentleness, collective freedom ... You can't delegate personal responsibility to your country. You are your country'.⁶⁴ This was not quite as atomistic as it sounded; as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has rightly pointed out, 'when Thatcherites talked of "the individual" what they really meant was "the family"'.⁶⁵ But what was true was that there was little role for government in promoting morality. Shirley Robin Letwin pointed out that Thatcherism rejected 'the usual paradigm for political action. For "the government" cannot be expected to "do something" about the condition of individuals and families in a modern liberal state'.⁶⁶

But there was one area – religious education – in which Thatcher believed the state *could* promote morality. She had argued for this exception in a newspaper article in 1978:

There is one sphere in which the state has a positive role. As a nation, we are heirs to a Christian culture and a Christian moral condition. I still believe that the vast majority of parents want their children to enter into that inheritance. Accordingly, I hold it to be the business of government to ensure (though with proper respect for the consciences of all who dissent or who belong to another religion) that our schools shall be places in which Christian belief and morality are taught. This is not indoctrination, merely a practical recognition of the truth that, while a mature person may reject the faith in which he has been brought up, a child will find it difficult to acquire any faith at all without some instruction in the discipline of belief and practice.⁶⁷

There were pragmatic grounds for allowing the state a particular role in religious education. One of Mary Whitehouse's crotchets during the 1970s was a 'Save Religious Education' campaign, and the Conservatives were able to exploit the fact that some Labour

activists had been campaigning against religious education. Thatcher repeatedly spoke in defence of religious education in 1978, declaring herself 'passionate for it'.⁶⁸ Her emphasis on religious education helps explain why, a decade later, she was ready to accept amendments to the 1988 Education Reform Act defending Christian religious education (though, as with Section 28 of the Local Government Act, a desire to curb 'loony left' councils was also important).

In the late 1980s Thatcher began once again to address religious themes more explicitly in her speeches. She had done this less in her early years in government, partly because of the sidelining of Sherman as a speechwriter, partly because of the truth of Mario Cuomo's dictum that 'we campaign in poetry, we govern in prose'. In her memoirs, she recorded that 'near the end of my time as Prime Minister, I became increasingly conscious of and interested in the relationship between Christianity and economic and social policy'.⁶⁹ Most famously, she offered her own highly coloured rendering of the Gospels in her address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988, the notorious 'Sermon on the Mound'.⁷⁰ She also asked Michael Alison and Brian Griffiths, then head of the Policy Unit, to initiate a dialogue (including non-Tories) about Christianity and Conservatism, and contributed a foreword to the ensuing volume of essays.⁷¹ Her renewed interest in theology may have been prompted by the loss of other familiar coordinates, once the battles against socialism and the trade unions had largely been won, but she may also have had a personal desire to reconnect with the religion of her youth. In 1989, she resolved to read the entire Old Testament, giving her staff daily updates on her progress.⁷²

Throughout her leadership, Thatcher's reading of Christianity was partial and idiosyncratic.⁷³ She drew her homilies from an odd melange of spiritual authorities – St Paul, C. S. Lewis, hymns she had learned at chapel as a girl. Clergy objected that this was a travesty of Christianity. But in a sense that did not matter. In the 1970s and 1980s Thatcher was appealing, not to clergy, but to a lay public that was itself often hazy about Christian theology, and was thus open to her over-simplifications. Her half-remembered, 'Sunday School' Christianity resonated with voters whose own religion was increasingly only a half-remembered relict of childhood.

The duties of churches

Thatcher's belief that the state could not, in general, legislate for morality placed a special responsibility on religious groups. As Sherman put it in a draft speech for Margaret Thatcher in 1978, 'values cannot be given by the state or politicians. Only religion has proved able to

impart them'.⁷⁴ Thatcher's advisors had seen the Church of England as a potential source of support in the 1970s. A policy document by Sir Keith Joseph entitled 'draft questions for Mrs Thatcher' included the question 'How can Mrs T help bring the Church back into a helpful influence?' and the Conservatives were initially optimistic that this was possible.⁷⁵ Although some bishops, like Mervyn Stockwood of Southwark, were already hostile to the Conservatives in the 1970s, others seemed sympathetic. Coggan's 'Call to the Nation' had raised many of the same concerns about moral decline as Margaret Thatcher. Graham Leonard, Bishop of Truro and chairman of the influential Board of Social Responsibility, spoke in support of Thatcher's call for immigration controls in 1978, saying 'I am thankful that Mrs Thatcher has raised the issue at the present time'.⁷⁶ It was not until Thatcher's clash with Archbishop Robert Runcie over the commemoration of the Falklands War in 1982, and reports like *The Church and the Bomb* (1982) and *Faith in the City* (1985), that the *Kulturkampf* between the Thatcherites and the Anglican episcopate really began. In background, many of Thatcher's antagonists on the bishops' bench – John Habgood (Eton and King's), Stanley Booth-Clibborn (Highgate, the Royal Artillery and Oriel) and David Sheppard (Sherborne, Trinity Hall and the England cricket captaincy) – resembled the wets who opposed her from within the Cabinet. Runcie (who had been in the Oxford University Conservative Association with Thatcher) was much closer to her grammar-school background, but (like Michael Heseltine) had acquired a patrician patina through service in the Guards.⁷⁷

Hugo Young described the attitude of many Conservatives to the church as one of 'affronted disappointment', and this is a very good description of Margaret Thatcher's own attitude in the 1980s.⁷⁸ In a 1987 interview with *Woman's Own*, during a discussion of the AIDS crisis, she complained that the churches had neglected their duties as a guardian of morals:

I think one is entitled to say to the great institutions of life, because I mean Parliament is not the only institute [*sic*] of life, your churches are your very great institutions, your great voluntary institutions or your great voluntary associations ... you are also, I think, entitled to look to them, to say: 'Look. There are certain standards, and if you undermine fundamentally these standards, you will be changing our way of life!'

It is when sometimes the authority of those institutions is undermined because they have not been so forthright that then people turn too much to the State.⁷⁹

As Ewen Green has argued, Thatcherites, like Conservatives earlier in the twentieth century, were inclined to judge organs of civil society by whether or not they were performing a 'valuable and effective

social role'. According to this criterion, the Church of England was increasingly found wanting in the 1980s.⁸⁰ Thatcher unfavourably contrasted the established church with religious groups that *did* perform a valuable role. She sometimes found this comparison in her own Methodist tradition, extolling Wesley as the archetype of a religious leader.⁸¹ She liked to quote those sayings of Wesley's that did not condemn wealth accumulation, such as 'gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can', and 'the fault does not lie in money but in them that use it'.⁸² Such sloganising ignored both the complexity of Wesley's own social teaching and the trenchant criticism of Thatcherism offered by Methodist leaders like Donald Soper and Leslie Griffiths.

The other religion that she contrasted with Anglicanism was Judaism, which embodied similar virtues of hard work and self-help. Years as MP for Finchley meant that she had had closer contact than her Conservative predecessors with the Jewish community (and was notably more willing to promote talented Jewish MPs to the front bench). At Sherman's prompting, she had also endeavoured to win Jewish recruits to the Conservatives in the 1970s.⁸³ She often described the values she extolled as coming from the 'Judaic-Christian' or 'Judaic-Christian' tradition, thus deliberately including Jews and emphasising the contribution of the Old Testament.⁸⁴ As Prime Minister, Thatcher was particularly drawn to the Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits; like her, he was a defender of traditional family life and an advocate of self-help who criticised the *Faith in the City* report.⁸⁵ Jakobovits increasingly became Thatcher's 'ideal-type' of what a senior cleric should be, and she rewarded him first with a knighthood and then with a peerage (the first rabbi to be ennobled). Her reading of Judaism, like Methodism, was monolithic and contestable; as Chief Rabbi, Jakobovits represented only one wing of British Jewry, and many Jews opposed Thatcher's policies. It is notable that she did not extol Islamic values in the same way as Christian and Jewish ones, though in ignoring Muslims she was typical of politicians of all parties in the years before the *Satanic Verses* controversy began in 1989.

Thatcher's enfolding of different religious traditions was only possible at a particular conjuncture in late twentieth-century British religious history. As a Methodist-turned-Anglican, she was herself a product of the decline of Nonconformity after the First World War, and of its assumption into a more generic common Protestantism.⁸⁶ But the 'Nonconformist Conscience' was still within living memory in the 1970s and 80s; when she invoked Wesley, Thatcher could be confident that her audience had at least a vague idea who she was talking about. Likewise, her singling-out of Judeo-Christian virtues would have been

possible neither in the anti-semitic political culture at the start of the twentieth century, nor in the more inclusively multi-faith Britain at its end. Above all, Thatcher's appeal to religion was to a 'silent majority' who no longer attended church, but who considered themselves Christians, who had some folk memory of religious stories and symbols, and who remained susceptible to appeals to Christian morality. Declining observance meant that this was a large constituency in the final decades of the twentieth century.⁸⁷ That it had fallen away from churchgoing was partly a result of the declining authority of the clergy, and Thatcher was able to exploit this. Just as she presented herself as the embodiment of the frustrations of the ordinary citizen with 'the government', so she could embody the disappointment of ordinary Christians with their clergy. In both cases, she argued, ordinary people had been let down by a *trahison des clercs*. In this interpretation, clerical condemnation could even be sported as a badge of honour. Writing to congratulate Thatcher on her Church of Scotland speech in 1988, Mary Whitehouse reassured her that 'the very fact that you received so much "flak" from certain quarters indicated how effective your words were and I am sure were echoed in the hearts of countless people throughout the land, many of whom never go to Church'.⁸⁸ Thatcherism, then, drew on the survival of what Callum Brown has called 'discursive Christianity' long after the 1960s (when Brown claims it vanished). But it also benefited from, and contributed to, the decline of religious authority. Thatcher showed scant respect for the remaining vestiges of 'Christian Britain', as her unsuccessful attempt to deregulate Sunday shopping in 1985–6, which cost her some evangelical support, demonstrated.⁸⁹

Conclusion

'The central paradox of Thatcherism', John Campbell has remarked, 'is that Mrs Thatcher presided over and celebrated a culture of rampant materialism – "fun, greed and money" – fundamentally at odds with her own values which were essentially conservative, old-fashioned and puritanical.' For Campbell, 'Margaret Thatcher is the link between two utterly opposed moral systems which reflect not only the ambivalence of her own personality but the story of Britain in the twentieth century: Alfred Roberts to Mark Thatcher in three generations.'⁹⁰ But while this paradox may have been inherent in the variegated nature of Thatcherism, it was not until the consequences of Thatcher's economic policies became apparent in the 1980s that commentators began to notice it.⁹¹ Recognising this is important, because it reminds us that Thatcher's invocations of morality did not seem as preposterous, or as

replete with ironies, in the 1970s as they did by 1990. When she arrived on the doorstep of Downing Street on 4 May 1979, and intoned the Prayer of St Francis of Assisi, her promise to bring harmony, truth, faith and hope resonated with many of her hearers.⁹² But it resonated precisely because it recalled the promise of moral regeneration that she had first made several years before, a promise that had been instrumental in smoothing her 'path to power'.

- 75 Lawson, *View from Number 11*, p. 11.
- 76 Owner occupation rose from 51 per cent to 68 per cent of households between 1979 and 1992: H. Young, *Thatcherism: Did Society Survive?* (London: Catholic Housing Aid Society, 1992), p. 10.
- 77 Lawson, *View from Number 11*, pp. 629–30; C. Hay, 'Good Inflation, Bad Inflation? The Housing Boom, Economic Growth and the Disaggregation of Inflationary Preferences in the UK and Ireland', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 11 (2009), 461–78.
- 78 The Conservatives were very successful in reducing the PSBR, but not initially by cutting spending, rather by increasing taxes.
- 79 Though Samuel Brittan had stressed the importance of the exchange rate in 1978: Joseph to Thatcher, 9 October 1978, MTFW 111869.
- 80 D. Cobham, *The Making of Monetary Policy in the UK 1975–2000* (Chichester: Wiley, 2002), p. 142.
- 81 Tomlinson, 'Mrs Thatcher's Macroeconomic Adventurism'.
- 82 I. Crewe, 'How to Win a Landslide Without Really Trying', in A. Ranney (ed.), *Britain at the Polls 1983: A Study of the General Election* (Durham, NC: American Enterprise Institute, 1985), pp. 178–9.
- 83 Thatcher, *Path to Power*, pp. 420–30; C. Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30 (1996), 253–77.

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- 1 K. Joseph, speech at Edgbaston, 19 October 1974, MTFW 101830.
- 2 A. M. Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality 1968–1990* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 2.
- 3 P. Williamson, 'The Doctrinal Politics of Stanley Baldwin', in M. Bentley (ed.), *Public and Private Doctrine: Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 181–208.
- 4 S. Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 91.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 6 S. R. Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 337.
- 7 D. Marquand, 'The Paradoxes of Thatcherism', in R. Skidelsky (ed.), *Thatcherism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 165.
- 8 See D. Sandbrook, 'Against the Permissive Society: The Backlash of the Late 1960s', in W. R. Louis (ed.), *More Adventures with Britannia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 55–71.
- 9 F. Mount, *Cold Cream: My Early Life and Other Mistakes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 288.
- 10 For Thatcher's voting record on permissive legislation in the 1960s, see G. K. Fry, 'Parliament and "Morality": Thatcher, Powell and Populism', *Contemporary British History*, 12 (1998), 139–47.
- 11 H. L. A. Hart, *Law, Liberty and Morality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).
- 12 M. Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 152–3.
- 13 P. Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1959).

- 14 'What Lies Ahead in the Seventies?', *Finchley Press*, 2 January 1970, MTFW 101709.
- 15 BBC *Woman's Hour* interview, 9 April 1970, MTFW 101845.
- 16 Draft letter from Whitehouse to the *Birmingham Post* and other papers, 7 May 1970, NVALA papers, Box 54, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex. For Whitehouse's work with NVALA, see L. Black, 'There was Something about Mary: The National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA) and Social Movement History', in N. J. Crowson, M. Hilton and J. McKay (eds.), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 182–200.
- 17 A. Maude, *The Common Problem* (London: Constable, 1969), pp. 197, 51.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 273.
- 19 For a detailed account of the circumstances of this speech, and the reaction to it, see A. Denham and M. Garnett, *Keith Joseph* (Chesham: Acumen, 2001), pp. 265–75.
- 20 Joseph, speech at Edgbaston, 19 October 1974.
- 21 Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 262.
- 22 Speech to Conservative Central Council, 15 March 1975, MTFW 102655.
- 23 Speech to the English-Speaking Union, Houston, Texas, 9 September 1977, MTFW 103268.
- 24 Speech to the Scottish Conservative Conference, Perth, 13 May 1978, MTFW 103684.
- 25 Sherman to Thatcher, 22 March 1979, Alfred Sherman papers, Box 8, AR MT/M/2115, Royal Holloway, University of London.
- 26 Lord Hailsham, undated article, 'Moral Behaviour, Not Economic Failure', circulated by Keith Joseph as part of his 'Notes Towards the Definition of Policy', 7 April 1975, MTFW 110098.
- 27 Speech at St Lawrence Jewry, 30 March 1978, MTFW 103522.
- 28 Maude, *Common Problem*, p. 41.
- 29 Interview with *Woman's Own*, 23 September 1987 (Thatcher CD-ROM).
- 30 C. Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30 (1996), 253–77. See also Robert Saunders, Chapter 1 in this volume.
- 31 Speech at Finchley, 11 April 1979, MTFW 104002.
- 32 Election address, 11 April 1979, MTFW 104003; speech to Young Conservatives, Bournemouth, 10 February 1979, MTFW 103942; speech at Cardiff, 16 April 1979, MTFW 104011.
- 33 K. O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 320; Bernard Donoghue, *The Heat of the Kitchen*, rev. and updated edn (London: Politico's, 2004), p. 271.
- 34 Conference speech, Blackpool, 14 October 1977, MTFW 103443. Thatcher apparently did not get her speechwriters' joke, trying to change the punchline to 'keep taking the pills': A. Watkins, *A Conservative Coup: The Fall of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Duckworth, 1991), p. 27; S. Hoggart, *A Long Lunch: My Stories and I'm Sticking to Them* (London: John Murray, 2010), p. 191.

- 35 Speech at Cardiff, 16 April 1979.
- 36 Speech to Finchley Inter-Church Luncheon Club, 17 November 1969, reported in *Finchley Press*, 21 November 1969, MTFW 101704; speech presenting Templeton Prize, 13 April 1976, MTFW 103008; speech to Conservative Women's Conference, 24 May 1978, MTFW 103696; interview with *Catholic Herald*, 22 December 1978, MTFW 103793.
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- 39 A. Sherman, *Paradoxes of Power: Reflections on the Thatcher Interlude* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), p. 56.
- 40 Speech at St Lawrence Jewry, 30 March 1978.
- 41 For the NFOL, see A. Whipple, 'Speaking for Whom? The 1971 Festival of Light and the Search for the "Silent Majority"', *Contemporary British History*, 24 (2010), 319–39.
- 42 Whitehouse to E. Heath, 17 April 1973, NVALA papers, Box 111.
- 43 J. Poulton, *Dear Archbishop* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), p. 18.
- 44 D. Coggan, foreword to Poulton, *Dear Archbishop*, p. 7.
- 45 R. Wood to Archbishop D. Coggan, 26 March 1975, Coggan papers, vol. 190, fol. 8, Lambeth Palace Library.
- 46 Speech to Greater London Young Conservatives (Iain Macleod Memorial Lecture), 4 July 1977, MTFW 103411.
- 47 Press release, 25 October 1979, NVALA papers, Box 59; Thatcher to Whitehouse, 19 April 1979, NVALA papers, Box 4 (2002 accession).
- 48 Sherman, *Paradoxes of Power*, p. 41.
- 49 Memorandum, 31 January 1979, KJ 18/6, Keith Joseph papers, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford. The quotation from Temple was omitted from the final version.
- 50 M. Cowling (ed.), *Conservative Essays* (London: Cassell, 1978), p. 5.
- 51 Shadow Cabinet, 17 April 1978, Thatcher papers, THCR 2/6/1/162, quoted in E. H. H. Green, *Thatcher* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), p. 128. See also Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Chapter 7 in this volume.
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- 53 See Camilla Schofield, Chapter 5 in this volume.
- 54 'The Moral Basis of a Free Society', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 1978, MTFW 103687.
- 55 Speech to Greater London Young Conservatives, 4 July 1977.
- 56 Speech at Conservative Political Centre Summer School, 6 July 1979, MTFW 104107.
- 57 Speech at St Lawrence Jewry, 4 March 1981, MTFW 104587.
- 58 R. Burt, 'Mrs Thatcher: The First Two Years', *Sunday Times*, 1 May 1981.
- 59 R. Samuel, 'Mrs Thatcher and Victorian Values', in R. Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 337.
- 60 D. Willetts, 'The Family', in D. Kavanagh and A. Seldon (eds.), *The Thatcher Effect: A Decade of Change* (Oxford University Press, 1989),

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 - 64 Notes for conference speech, ‘Thoughts on the Moral Case I’ (undated, but before 6 October 1979), MTFW 112195.
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 - 67 ‘The Moral Basis of a Free Society’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 1978.
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 - 70 See also her second speech at St Lawrence Jewry, 4 March 1981.
 - 71 M. Alison and D. Edwards (eds.), *Christianity and Conservatism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), p. 10.
 - 72 Thatcher reputedly asked her staff to tell her the name of the only book in the Bible that did not mention God, and was delighted when no one correctly identified the Book of Esther, adding, ‘it is a very gory book’: H. Young, *One of Us*, rev. edn (London: Pan, 1990), p. 426.
 - 73 For a critical exegesis of the ‘Sermon on the Mound’, see J. Raban, *God, Man and Mrs Thatcher* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), especially pp. 32–3.
 - 74 ‘Speech Module for Thatcher: A Nation Under God’, 17 November 1978, Sherman papers, Box 6, AR/MT/5/2/2.
 - 75 ‘Draft Questions for Mrs Thatcher, to be first considered by Mr Whitelaw’, undated, KJ 8/22, Conservative Party Archive.
 - 76 *Church Times*, 17 February 1978, p. 20. Leonard’s remarks were criticised by other bishops, including the Bishop of Lichfield: see *Church Times*, 3 March 1978, p. 1.
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 - 79 Interview with *Woman’s Own*, 23 September 1987.
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 - 81 I. Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 201.

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 - 83 Sherman to R. Ryder, 23 March 1978, TCHR 2/6/1/225, Margaret Thatcher papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge; Sherman to A. Howarth, 7 February 1977, TCHR 2/6/1/226.
 - 84 See e.g. Thatcher, Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, Monash University, 6 October 1981; speech to Board of Deputies of British Jews, 15 December 1981; interview with *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 July 1986; interview with *Paris Match*, 2 March 1990; Pankhurst Lecture to 300 Group, 18 July 1990 (all on Thatcher CD-ROM).
 - 85 A. Friedlander, ‘Immanuel Jakobovits’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Young, *One of Us*, pp. 422–4.
 - 86 See M. Grimley, ‘The Religion of Englishness: Puritanism, Providentialism and “National Character”, 1918–45’, *Journal of British Studies*, 46 (2007), 884–906.
 - 87 For the best account of twentieth-century decline, see S. J. D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c. 1920–1960* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
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 - 89 For ‘discursive Christianity’ and ‘Christian Britain’, see C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001); also J. Garnett *et al.*, *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2007); for sabbatarianism, see G. I. T. Machin, *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 214–15.
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 - 92 Remarks on becoming Prime Minister, 4 May 1979, MTFW 104078. For a speechwriter’s account of this episode, see R. Millar, *A View from the Wings: West End, West Coast, Westminster* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993), p. 266. Mary Whitehouse wrote to the new premier that ‘it was a wonderful thing to hear a Prime Minister utter the marvellous words of St Francis before the whole world – already one senses a lifting of the spirit!’ Whitehouse to Thatcher, 9 May 1979, NVALA papers, Box 59.
- 5 ‘A NATION OR NO NATION?’ ENOCH POWELL AND THATCHERISM
- 1 Bill Schwarz interview with Enoch Powell, 26 April 1988 (private recording). See also J. E. Powell, *A Nation or No Nation? Six Years in British Politics*, ed. R. Ritchie (London: Elliot Right Way Books, 1978), pp. 121–74. In this collection of speeches, Powell posed four questions to ‘the nation’: ‘A free

