

We Don't Do Babylon

Erin Runions in English Political Discourse

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There are several reasons why Erin Runions' new book is important. For what it might be worth, I find myself in strong agreement with her anarchic reflections on authority, power and radical equality. In terms of the field, *The Babylon Complex* is a model of what biblical studies can be: it is both unashamedly from biblical studies but it also shows how biblical studies can contribute seriously to wider debates in the humanities, cultural studies and politics. In terms of the frame of reference, it is a significant contribution to the growth area of the role of the Bible in contemporary political discourses. Runions convincingly shows how the fluid and often ambiguous image of Babylon in American politics and culture is pervasive and is found in present debates about national sovereignty, hierarchy, wars, free markets, (theo-)democracy, family values, sexuality, biopolitics, and so on. What was particularly striking to me was that her general results about the Bible in American politics and culture are similar to what has been happening in my own area of research: the Bible in English politics and culture (Crossley 2014; 2015).¹ Some emphases are obviously more prominent and polemical in American mainstream political discourses than British or English ones (e.g. explicit fears about sexuality). Nevertheless, the idea that the Bible functions as a higher authority is, as we will see, precisely what has been happening contemporaneously in English politics. One particularly important insight, which almost inevitably cuts across both contexts like a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, is the idea that transcendence functions as sovereign authority in the absence of such authority when the market is prioritized. In particular, Runions shows how this effectively has to be the case "if the United States wants to continue to lay an ideological claim to world power, and if lines of privilege are to be protected against the tyranny of too much equality (i.e. revolt)." Runions adds:

Good and evil are terms that subreptively invest populations within and between nations, cultivating, intensifying, or selling life for capital, and arranging it in graduated formations of possibility, privilege, and bodily health and comfort. Transcendence manages and obscures the decentring of globalization. A process of scripturalizing is central to this theopolitics and the transcendence on which it relies. (Runions 2014, 249)

This, I would add, works equally well for understanding the Bible in mainstream English political discourse. What I want to do in the rest of this response is to show how Runions' presentation of American discourses helps us further understand English political discourses, particularly in terms of defining and

¹ I am deliberately using "English" rather than "British" here because a topic like "Babylon" would have some significantly different nuances in certain Northern Irish and Scottish contexts, especially where the force of Protestant-Catholic divides can still be felt in a way that is not typically seen in English and (for different reasons) Welsh contexts.

justifying the role of the nation state in light of neoliberal economics and military interventionism.

Babylon on the Left

What was also striking for me was the apparent political *differences* between American and English political discourses and the use of Babylon and interrelated imagery. Certainly, there are general structural similarities easily found in popular culture and it is not as if such imagery is absent in English or British culture. TV series such *Hotel Babylon* or *Queer as Folk* (Runions 2014, 35) would have provided plenty more data for Runions in terms of debauchery, enticements, consumption, sexuality, gender, class, and so on, with at least an assumption that some British or English viewers would pick up on the implications of “Babylon.” But it would probably also be fair to say that that English or British receptions of Boney M’s hugely popular “Rivers of Babylon” might typically involve nostalgia and embarrassing dancing after a couple of drinks rather than too much, if any, concern about what “Babylon” itself might entail or wondering what Boney M might do if they got around to singing verse 9 of Psalm 137. Indeed, it would not be too much of a push to imagine the bafflement on such people’s faces if they read what has been done (Runions 2014, 149-51; 159-63; 176) with one of the most popular songs over the past 40 years, not unlike David Gray’s outrage when he discovered one such fate of his song, “Babylon” (Runions 2014, 152 n. 4). Having gone through a great deal of biblical language in English political discourses over the past 40 years, it is once again striking that Babylon does not seem to be especially pervasive, or at least not *explicitly* so, and certainly not post-Thatcher (cf. Nunn 2002, 88-89).

However, what is notable is that the anti-Babylon rhetoric, or at least the associated “apocalyptic” imagery from Revelation, has been a part of the Bible of the radical left in English political discourse (cf. Runions 2014, 29-32 and below for American examples). A socialist invocation of Revelation more generally is at the heart of such a long-established strand of the English radical tradition, with influences cited from Blake to the Nonconformist presence in the British Labour and Communist parties and figures such as E.P. Thompson. Indeed, it might even be said that this tradition has long been part of revolutionary thinking in the old fashioned sense of opposing the dominant powers—including those here in Britain and England (Crossley 2014, 18-29). But it has also involved ideas about taking control of the state and bringing about a realisable utopianism. In the case of the related language of Revelation, probably the Radical Bible’s most celebrated presence was when the 1945 Labour government (which included politically radical figures like Nye Bevan) founded the National Health Service and developed the welfare state in light of the Beveridge Report and its attack on “evil giants” of “want,” “squalor,” “disease,” and “ignorance” (cf. Revelation 6). This is Revelation understood in the exegetical traditions of, for instance, Christian Socialism and Matthew Henry but this language is also the language (refracted through Blake) of a potential heaven-on-earth in the here-and-now and thus has an

anti-Babylon: “Jerusalem.”² In post-War English political discourse, this building of a New Jerusalem (Revelation 3.12; 21.3) is again more in the realisable utopian tradition than the tradition of the Jerusalem-themed revenge fantasy outlined by Runions (2014, 15; 167-171), not that the two are mutually exclusive of course, as we will see below. Even with the contemporary (even pre-Corbyn) Labour Party, “Jerusalem” continued to be sung at the end of Labour Party conferences and the language of New Jerusalem is still invoked in Labour debates (e.g. Cruddas 2012).

But the Babylon-New Jerusalem of the English radical tradition was largely pushed outside mainstream political discourse over the past 40 years. Indeed, with the emergence of Thatcher’s Bible since the 1970s, and firmly embedded in the economic shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism, the Radical Bible was pushed outside parliamentary discourse. Margaret Thatcher—the most explicit user of the Bible in post-War English politics—rethought the dominant Liberal Bible tradition (the Bible as the foundation of democracy, tolerance, freedom, rule of law, etc.; Sherwood 2006; 2011; Runions 2014, 94-95) in terms of what we might call the Neoliberal Bible. Thatcher’s Bible heavily emphasised the significance of the individual, free-market economics, anti-Communism, anti-socialism, and the role of charitable giving over against the perceived dominance of the welfare state (Crossley 2014; Filby 2015; cf. Crines and Theakston 2015). The key emphases of Thatcher’s Bible became the template for mainstream politics and, most crucially, for Tony Blair.

Blair was significant for (at least) three reasons (for full discussion see Crossley 2014, 210-241). First, he was a Labour politician accepting Thatcher’s Bible and thereby normalising some of her key emphases for the centre-left. Second, the Radical Bible tradition associated with the Labour Party had effectively become obsolete in parliamentary discourse with Tony Benn seemingly its last great advocate. Third, Blair added a socially liberal qualification to Thatcher’s economically liberal emphasis that the Conservative David Cameron would in turn accept. For Blair, the Bible (one way or another) was ultimately supportive of equality in gender and sexuality. It is striking that whenever the Bible was cited in the same-sex marriage debates of 2013 it was cited in *favour* of same-sex marriage (Crossley 2014, 239-241). Same-sex relations did not represent Babylon in English mainstream political discourse—in sharp contrast to certain American discourses (cf. Runions 2014, 148-78)—other than among the more conservative evangelical groups who do not carry the same political weight as they do in America. It should also be pointed out that more politically radical supporters of same-sex marriage like Peter Tatchell could simultaneously see this as a more liberal or even reactionary move, using the logic that same-sex marriage should be supported because everyone should be equal under law while accepting that someone like Jesus, who had the potential for radical eroticism, would not waste their time with such conservatism (Tatchell 1996; 2010; 2011).

Nevertheless, the Radical Bible remained present outside parliamentary discourse and indeed in opposition to parliamentary discourse. It is here that the language of Babylon likewise has remained. For instance, the idea of attacking the governing Babylon of the present has a strong presence in sub- and/or counter-

² On “New Jerusalem” and the Radical Bible see e.g. Kovacs and Rowland (2004: 21-22; 72-74; 226-43).

cultural movements, particularly in reggae and dub, and associated Rastafari traditions, where the demonised power labelled “Babylon” is common enough in their Anglicized versions. English writers of Jamaican background have highlighted the tension of the Bible being The Book of both the coloniser and the colonised and the role this tension has played in relation to immigration issues. For instance, the Jamaican-born poet Linton Kwesi Johnson who, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible in 2011, noted that it is simultaneously “a most effective tool of colonisation” and “the only [book] in my illiterate grandmother’s house when I was a child in Jamaica” (Johnson 2011; cf. Caesar 1996). Johnson noted the influence on Jamaican popular music and oral culture and how “biblical sayings are very powerful tools in the rhetoric of everyday discourse, and a rich repository of metaphor, simile, aphorism and imagery” (Johnson 2011). He said that he was able to recite certain biblical texts from memory and that the biblical references are found in his writings, not least because it was his “first real introduction to written verse” (Johnson 2011).

But this is not simply the Cultural Bible; it is the Radical Bible too, notably in Johnson’s use of “Babylon.” In the following examples, he uses established confrontational anti-Babylon themes with anti-establishment sentiments and “apocalyptic” language which are close to being politically revolutionary in terms of the great insurrection and the writing of history:

it woz in April nineteen eighty-wan
doun inna di ghetto of Brixtan
dat di babylan dem cause such a frickshan
an it bring about a great insohreckshan
an it spread all ovah di naeshan (“Di Great Insohreckshan”)

well doun in Bristol
dey ad no pital
but dem chase di babylan away
man you shoulda si yu babylan
how dem really run away
you shoulda si yu babylan dem dig-up dat day (“Mekkin Histri”)

These poems were written in the aftermath of the 1981 Brixton riots. Johnson argued that “the tone” is “celebratory because I wanted to capture the mood of exhilaration felt by black people at the time” (Johnson 2011). But Johnson would later connect these ideas with the 2011 riots which began in Tottenham after Mark Duggan was killed by the police. At the beginning of the riots, Johnson was performing in Belgium with the Dennis Bovell Dub Band and would recall his performances of “Di Great Insohreckshan” and “Mekkin Histri,” reflecting that, if anything, the problems had worsened since they were first performed. We get some insight into the identity of Babylon:

I was not at all surprised that the riots began in Tottenham in the light of the killing of Mark Duggan by a police officer and the history of conflict between the police and the black community in that part of London...It is

clear to me that the causes of the riots are racial oppression and racial injustice, as well as class oppression and social injustice. The most widespread expression of discontent that I have ever witnessed in this country has to be seen in the context of the marginalisation of sections of the working class and the ideologically driven austerity measures of the Tory-led government. (Johnson 2012)

This use of Babylon in relation to issues of race, class and economics puts Johnson in direct opposition to the Thatcher-led state and in alignment with the more radical politics which had long attracted him (Morrison 2012). Indeed, he had joined the Black Panthers while at school and, as Runions notes (Runions 2014, 31), the Black Panthers used Babylon to denote American state power. While he was openly anti-Thatcher he also saw her epitomising the political establishment and the dominant neoliberal settlement: “Her cross-party admiration stems from the fact that she is regarded as the architect of the neo-liberal orthodoxy to which they all subscribe, notwithstanding the dire straits in which the free market dogma has taken the British economy” (Johnson 2013; cf. Morrison 2012). Similarly, while attacking Thatcher’s politics on race, Johnson also located himself in distinction from “black leaders” in the political establishment, notably in the context of recalling the 2011 riots (Johnson 2012). Johnson epitomises the fate of the Radical Bible over the past 40 years: he is positioned firmly outside parliamentary discourse and the use of “Babylon” signifies this as loudly as any common biblical allusion.

Babylon Gets Complex

As hinted above, this Babylon is not so alien to American popular culture. It depends, of course, where we look and, as with English uses, it is a discourse marginalised in relation to mainstream political discourses. As Runions shows, Babylon can be used to denote America by critics from right and left (Runions 2014, 29-32). She notes:

When the religious right refers to the ills of Babylon, it is to condemn the fracturing of a single Christian morality in the United States; when the secular left refers to Babylon it is to decry the abuses of an antidemocratic, capitalist system...Left-wing and secular groups also make use of Babylon, picking up on the way African American slaves used the term...Building on these kinds of interpretations, Babylon becomes a name for colonial oppression in Africana resistance movements...Drawing on Africana traditions, secular, antistatist, and anticolonial discourses refer to Babylon to represent the United States as a place of captivity and its government as an oppressive force. (Runions 2014, 29-31)

Perhaps an obvious musical example with striking ideological and aesthetic similarities to Johnson might be Public Enemy who, in “Get the Fuck Outta Dodge,” likewise share an anti-establishment tradition of attacking police and home state power as Babylon (e.g. “But I know how you do/You’re straight from Babylon”). But we might wonder what would happen if we looked at the Bible more from above (e.g. in parliamentary politics or in the mainstream media) and ask whether Runion’s analysis of the pervasiveness of American Babylons and

Jerusalems would really be alien to English political discourse? Such analyses have certainly been tried and the answer is complicated.

As mentioned above, Babylon is not the sort of image prominent in mainstream English political discourses, at least not since Thatcher (cf. Nunn 2002, 88-89). The Bible in English political discourse is typically vague and under-the-radar so as not to rouse any hostilities among voters distrustful of anything with too much God. It should probably come as no surprise that Tony Blair attempted to (re-) introduce a sort of Babylon into the Bible and into English political discourse during the War on Terror in a way recognisable from Runions' book, though still using a degree of vagueness so as not to alarm. What we get with Blair is a peculiar fusion of the sort of "apocalyptic" thinking associated with conservative evangelical thinking in America, Thatcherite Cold War rhetoric, and the Labour tradition of building a New Jerusalem but this time "the actual place" (i.e. Iraq; Runions 2014, 148), and elsewhere *abroad*.

Obviously invoking the precise phrase, "New Jerusalem," would have been problematic as the War on Terror began and continued. Nevertheless, the dog-whistle approach was more likely to gain some adherents within the Labour Party and potential sympathisers. Instead of explicitly mentioning the words "New Jerusalem" in his key speeches and memoirs, what we find instead in Blair's rhetoric is the reapplication of the apocalyptic language of dramatic social transformation for the victims of want, squalor, disease, and a new life for the poor, oppressed, dispossessed, ignorant, and wretched of the earth, combined with the idea of America as the shining house on the hill (Blair 2010, 434), an image also located in American discourses (Runions 2014, 248). This is the sort of language that has an emotional hold on the Labour Party, particularly in its founding of the National Health Service and the development of the welfare state, as we saw above. Blair would not, of course use such language in its traditional way, at least not in the sense of challenging capitalist ownership or bringing socialism to the people. What we get instead is the idea of a benign liberal imperialism where Rogue States will become New Jerusalems of thriving capitalist democracies. Likewise, invoking God in a more explicit way found in American political discourse—never mind the God of Bush and dispensationalism—was hardly going to be easily accepted by an English or British voting public or a Labour Party uneasy with the War on Terror. Indeed, even before the Bush-era (and certainly during it) the circle around Blair were nervous about anything smacking too much of God, Christianity and the Bible as they believed it would not have gone down well with the electorate (Crossley 2014, 213; 225-26). What Blair did instead was to continue using vague allusions and concepts associated with such "apocalyptic" traditions and give them an Anglicized spin (Hitler and Churchill were, therefore, namechecked). The "Thatcher brand" may have remained toxic but a sympathetic press and some Cold War rhetoric not in her name could, perhaps, sort that.

So how did Blair's Anglicised Babylon Complex look? A Bush-like Manichean outlook was contextualised by Blair in terms of WMDs in the build-up to the Iraq war. The following is Blair's preface to the 2002 government document on Iraq's alleged WMDs:

...in light of the debate about Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), I wanted to share with the British public the reasons why I

believe this issue to be a current and serious threat to the UK national interest.

In recent months, I have been increasingly alarmed by the evidence from inside Iraq that...Saddam Hussein is continuing to develop WMD, and with them the ability to inflict real damage upon the region, and the stability of the world.

What I believe the assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt is that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons, that he continues in his efforts to develop nuclear weapons, and that he has been able to extend the range of his ballistic missile programme...his [Saddam's] military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them.

In today's inter-dependent world, a major regional conflict does not stay confined to the region in question. Faced with someone who has shown himself capable of using WMD, I believe the international community has to stand up for itself and ensure its authority is upheld.

The threat posed to international peace and security, when WMD are in the hands of a brutal and aggressive regime like Saddam's, is real. Unless we face up to the threat, not only do we risk undermining the authority of the UN, whose resolutions he defies, but more importantly and in the longer term, we place at risk the lives and prosperity of our own people. (Blair 2002)

This assessment provided the basis for the infamous "45 minute" claim made by sections of the English press which then heightened the idea of impending apocalypse: "BRITS 45mins FROM DOOM: Cyprus within missile range," as headline of the Murdoch-owned *Sun* put it on September 25, 2002. If there was the concern that this apocalyptic rhetoric could be "too American" (and these were indeed worries for Blair's Director of Communications, Alastair Campbell; Campbell 2007, 111-12) then Blair provided a more nationalistic spin by referencing THE national story of World War II in order to justify parallels between Hitler and Saddam and, by implication, Churchill and Blair. The hypothetical Martian may have looked at this and wondered how the analogy might work in practice and, in his speech to Parliament on the eve of the Iraq war, Blair too knew that there were problems. He noted that there were "glib and sometimes foolish comparisons with the 1930s...history does not declare the future to us so plainly." Nevertheless, Blair sought to develop the "lessons" from this history more generally: "It is that, with history, we know what happened. We can look back and say, 'There's the time; that was the moment; that's when we should've acted.'" As the 1930s became more decontextualized this rhetoric easily slipped into the generalised Manichean binary (cf. Runions 2014, 177: "Because the biblical text is so distant from the present, and because it is routed through fixed notions of truth [about God, evil, or God's relation to the world], the referents in the present are quite moveable"). At this crucial point in his argument ("why I believe that the threat we face today is so serious and why we must tackle it"), Blair brought in quasi-biblical and primordial language of chaos and order:

The threat today is not that of the 1930s...the world is ever more interdependent...The key today is stability and order. The threat is chaos

and disorder—and there are two begetters of chaos: tyrannical regimes with weapons of mass destruction and extreme terrorist groups who profess a perverted and false view of Islam. (Hansard 2003)

We should not forget that this speech was partly an attempt to persuade the Labour Party of the need to invade the literal Babylon. This is significant because the Anglicizing of the apocalyptic rhetoric associated more with American Christianity is crucial to understanding Blair's argument.

Blair's liberal messianic interventionism was outlined in detail in his speech to the Labour Party conference in September 2001 where the quasi-biblical and apocalyptic language was, if anything, even more emphatic (e.g. "an act of evil," "we were with you at the first. We will stay with you to the last," "the shadow of this evil," "lasting good," "hope amongst all nations," "a new beginning," "justice and prosperity for the poor and dispossessed," "the starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor"; cf. e.g. Gen. 17; Isa. 1.16-17; 42.5-7; 49.6-13; Mic. 2.1; Ps. 5.4; 23; Prov. 28.1-28; Mark 13.10; Matt. 5.1-16; 12.21; Luke 6.20-49; Rom. 4.18; 2 Thess. 3.2; Col. 1.27; 1 John 5.19; Rev. 6; 22.13):

In retrospect, the Millennium marked only a moment in time. It was the events of September 11 that marked a turning point in history, where we confront the dangers of the future and assess the choices facing humankind. It was a tragedy. An act of evil... We [the British nation] were with you [the American people] at the first. We will stay with you to the last... It is that out of the shadow of this evil, should emerge lasting good: destruction of the machinery of terrorism wherever it is found; hope amongst all nations of a new beginning where we seek to resolve differences in a calm and ordered way; greater understanding between nations and between faiths; and above all justice and prosperity for the poor and dispossessed, so that people everywhere can see the chance of a better future through the hard work and creative power of the free citizen, not the violence and savagery of the fanatic. I know that here in Britain people are anxious, even a little frightened. I understand that... Don't kill innocent people. We are not the ones who waged war on the innocent. We seek the guilty... Today the threat is chaos... The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of Northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause. This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.³

Here was Blair bringing his take on the Babylon Complex to a potentially sceptical Labour Party and here we see the violent and militaristic side of an English Babylon from the left. The allusions to the Beveridge Report and the attack on the "evil giants" of "want," "squalor," "disease," and "ignorance" was, as we saw, language that influenced the famous 1945 Labour Party manifesto.

But order and chaos also turn up in the 1945 manifesto, and this too was to be given a notably Blairite reinterpretation. As the manifesto stated, "The Labour

³ Available at <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour2001/story/0,,562006,00.html> (part 1) and <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labourconference2001/story/0,1220,561988,00.html> (part 2)

Party stands for order as against the chaos which would follow the end of all public control. We stand for order, for positive constructive progress as against the chaos” (Labour Party 1945). But the 1945 manifesto was also written in the aftermath of World War II and attacked “Japanese barbarism” and “Nazi tyranny and aggression,” claiming “Victory in war must be followed by a prosperous peace” and that “we should build a new United Nations, allies in a new war on hunger, ignorance and want” (Labour Party 1945). Blair not only, then, reapplied early Labour thinking on welfare and poverty to justify the perceived results of the invasion but also used the War to justify the monopoly on violence in the present. Blair’s government represented an important moment in shifting the Radical Bible away from mainstream politics by adopting its language but ultimately rejecting, or at least displacing, any remains of revolutionary or socialist ideology.

The Good Samaritan Complex

Blair’s rhetoric did not win in every instance. No leader since has been tempted to use such “apocalyptic” language, no doubt because of significant public and political hostility towards the invasion of Iraq, and, as noted, a general political scepticism towards too much Bible and too much God in public discourse. This is a context where overt “literalist-allegorical” readings of the Bible in light of Saddam Hussein would be unusual and not the sort of thing expected of military chaplains (cf. Runions 2014, 153-56). Nevertheless, we should not think that similar ideological tendencies are therefore avoided in English political discourse and restricted to ideologues like Blair. On the contrary, such ideas are present and the Bible remains a significant authority for justifying various decisions. Babylon is perhaps a bit too vulgar, insufficiently liberal and in-your-face for the seemingly refined elite English tastes. Instead, what looks like it is rapidly becoming the most popular or prominent biblical touchpoint is the Good Samaritan and the associated phrase “love thy neighbour” (cf. Crossley and Harrison 2015). Thatcher used Luke 10:25-37 to weaken connections between “virtue” and “collectivism” (Thatcher 1978) and, in the most well-known use of the Bible in English political discourse, she famously claimed that “no-one would remember the Good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions; he had money as well” (Thatcher and Walden 1980).

The Good Samaritan has become an exegetical flashpoint in English political discourse, whether explicitly or implicitly. Cameron, for instance has also used the associated language of “love thy neighbour” as a means of justifying the downplaying of state provision of welfare, a likewise recognisable use of the Bible from Runions’ discussion of Babylon in American discourses (Cameron 2014b). For Cameron, “love thy neighbour” is the “heart of Christianity” which also happened to remind him about “the Alpha courses run in our prisons.” Potentially illiberal details about the Alpha Course, evangelical and charismatic Christianity, and conversion are not mentioned explicitly. We do not get Cameron engaging with Alpha issues such as speaking in tongues or whether homosexuality can be cured. Cameron does not talk about the work of Alpha’s controversial figure, Nicky Gumbel. This would simply be too alien to the vague uses of the Bible in English political discourse.

What we get instead, however, is Cameron using Alpha to support the volunteer work where the work of the state might have been expected. In the hands of Cameron, Alpha epitomises “love thy neighbour” for its “work with offenders to give them a new life inside and outside prison” just like “the soup kitchens and homeless shelters run by churches” (Cameron 2014b). For Cameron, the “same spirit” was shown during the storms earlier in 2014: “From Somerset to Surrey, from Oxford to Devon, churches became refuges, offering shelter and food, congregations raised funds and rallied together, parish priests even canoed through their villages to rescue residents. They proved, yet again, that people’s faith motivates them to do good deeds” (Cameron 2014b). It is significant that Cameron’s greater emphasis came after the heavy criticism for the perception that his government failed to intervene quickly in the crisis following the 2014 storms and flooding, alongside the sustained criticisms (including from church leaders) over the rise of food banks in relation to his government’s austerity measures. But the logic of Cameron’s Bible is that this is the Big Society in action, which, Cameron reminded us, was founded by Jesus himself (Cameron 2014a). Beneath the vagueness, the consensual rhetoric, and the praise of church groups, Cameron’s Bible and Cameron’s Christianity provides the authority for a significant political agenda: the attempt to reduce the role of the state in welfare provision and, by emphasising charity, putting the onus of support on members of society at large rather than on politicians and the state to an extent Thatcher did not and could not go. In other words, this is the intensification of Thatcher’s Neoliberal Bible.

But Cameron has provided a militaristic twist to the story of the Good Samaritan along the lines of the Good Samaritan going after the bandits and giving them the beating of their lives, though Cameron would not put it that way. In a Christmas speech, Cameron defended the invasion of Afghanistan in terms of liberal interventionism:

...the last of our combat troops left Afghanistan—and they left it a better place. Because of what you have done, life is better for ordinary Afghans. Their daughters are going to school. They are voting in democratic elections for the first time in their history. And life is safer on the streets of Britain. (Cameron 2014d)

Thus, “the Christian values” of “giving, sharing and taking care of others” is extended to include the war in Afghanistan since 2001 (and all that has happened there), a standard gendered liberal justification for the invasion (“their daughters are going to school”) and, despite the July 7 bombings and the murder of Lee Rigby, a major explanation for the War on Terror: the non-quantifiable making life “safer on the streets of Britain.”

This use of the Bible and Christianity to provide an implicit defence of, and authority for, foreign policy decisions is not new to Cameron and is clearer still in his handling of ISIS (or, as Cameron then preferred, ISIL). Cameron, like all mainstream political figures, constructs Islam in terms of True Islam (peaceful, democratic, tolerant, spiritual, obedient to the state, etc.) and False Islam (violent, terroristic, fanatical, a perversion, etc.) (Crossley 2015 forthcoming). True Islam likewise represents the values of the ideal British subject (and of the Bible, Christianity, religion, etc.): “We are peaceful people. We do not seek out

confrontation”; “Britain is an open, tolerant and free nation”; “adhering to British values is not an option or a choice, it is a duty for those who live in these islands.”⁴

Of course, according to this logic, when a British citizen beheads someone then this becomes a deviation from True Britishness, just as it is from True Islam (or, indeed, True Religion or True Christianity): “People across this country would’ve been sickened by the fact that there could have been a British citizen, a British citizen who could have carried out this unspeakable act. It is the very opposite of everything our country stands for” (Cameron 2014c). Yet this complicates Cameron’s construction. “We” too are prepared to use violence but do so when provoked and in a “calm, deliberate way but with an iron determination.” Here the subtle invocation of Christianity (assumed to be about “peace”) becomes important. Cameron mentioned the persecution of “minorities, including Christians” (he elsewhere claimed that “It is the case today that our religion is now the most persecuted religion around the world” [Cameron 2014a]) and brought in the common allusion to the Good Samaritan: “but we cannot ignore this threat to our security...there is no option of keeping our heads down...*we cannot just walk on by* if we are to keep this country safe...we have to confront this menace...we will do so in a calm, deliberate way but with an iron determination” (Cameron 2014c; emphasis mine). Cameron here is once again in line with the long-established political tradition of the Bible being assumed to be part of “our” tolerant, democratic heritage. But what Cameron further does is to use Christianity and the Bible to bolster his assumptions about who has the legitimate monopoly on violence. We might compare Obama playing the game of flat contradiction in claiming that Islamic State is neither Islamic nor a State, with assumptions including that which is deemed to embrace True Religion and those deemed to be non-Rogue States being the ones that may use violence.⁵ The driving narrative is of further importance when the opposition is categorised in metaphysical or fantastical terms. For Cameron (2014c), ISIS are *not* Muslims, “they are monsters” and “an organisation which is the embodiment of evil.”

There is undoubtedly going to be a sympathetic audience for this rhetoric in light of the (deliberately) shocking cruelty of ISIS. But this simplistic notion of the world of True Religion versus Evil has another function: it masks the complexity of the situation that gave rise to contexts whereby such actions can occur. There are numerous reasons that might help us understand the rise of ISIS other than the metaphysical “evil.” These include (among many) the decline of secular nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa, the combination of a rise of slums with sharp population growth, the role of oil in economic growth and crashes, a range of specific issues relating to Saudi Arabia (e.g. Wahhabism, American bases), sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s, the ongoing treatment of Palestinians, and, most immediately, the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath which, tellingly for someone like Cameron invoking “evil” and a “warped version of Islam” as a seemingly plausible explanation, is denied as a “source” or “root

⁴ Available at “MP David Cameron FULL Press Conference: UK Raises Terror Threat Level to ‘SEVERE’” (August 29, 2014)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4HDt9PUkeI&feature=youtu.be>; cf. Cameron 2014c.

⁵ Available at “President Obama: ‘ISIL is not Islamic’” (September 10, 2014), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwp8qKvE-0g&feature=youtu.be>.

cause” for the rise of ISIS.⁶ Moreover, George Monbiot points out that if we follow the logic of the rhetoric of morality in foreign policy, “we” might find “ourselves” bombing quite a lot of people in order to save lives, including “our” allies (Monbiot 2014). So why really choose ISIS here and now and not others? Why not explain how ISIS came to be in a way other than just “evil” or a “warped ideology?” Whatever the reasons for choosing the most deserving recipients of state violence, the implicit authority for such simplifications, and ultimately for carrying out violence, is grounded in, and justified by, a given politician’s construction of, and assumptions about, the Good Samaritan and, more broadly, the Bible, religion and Christianity.

The Good Samaritan Turns Left

By 2015 it seemed that the neoliberal reading of the Good Samaritan, and the Neoliberal Bible more generally, had full dominance over parliamentary discourse with the Radical Bible continuing to thrive among groups such as Occupy (Crossley 2014, 263-76). But the material and ideological impact of the 2008 financial crisis played no small part in one of the most remarkable events in recent English political memory: the unexpected landslide victory of the veteran radical, Jeremy Corbyn, as leader of the Labour Party. It has also marked the return to mainstream parliamentary discourse of the Radical Bible.

There have been plenty of ironic comments associating Corbyn with Messianic language and imagery and Corbyn has spoken about his upbringing with the Bible. Moreover, during his first month as leader he gave allusions to a specific case of the Good Samaritan. In his victory speech, Corbyn said that “we don’t pass by on the other side” (Labour Party 2015). Unlike Thatcher and Cameron’s neoliberal and militarist Good Samaritan, Corbyn’s Good Samaritan is clearly in the tradition of the Radical Bible. For instance, and we should keep Thatcher’s Good Samaritan in mind here, the quotation was in the context of a direct attack on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill (in sharp contrast to the Labour party line immediately before him):⁷ “misery and poverty to so many of the poorest in our society...we want to live in a society where we don’t pass by on the other side of those people rejected by an unfair welfare system. Instead we reach out to end the scourge of homelessness and desperation that so many people face in our society.” Indeed, it seems that a more direct allusion to (and contrast with) Thatcher’s famous claim of “no such thing as society” emerges in his interview on the *Andrew Marr Show* in September 2015 where he suggested that he wants a “decent democratic society” and a “society” where “we don’t pass by on the other side while the poor lie in the gutter.” There was also a further qualification when Corbyn delivered his first speech as Labour leader to the Labour Party Conference

⁶ Available at “MP David Cameron FULL Press Conference: UK Raises Terror Threat Level to ‘SEVERE’” (August 29, 2014).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4HDt9PUkeI&feature=youtu.be>.

⁷ The Welfare Reform and Work Bill was introduced by the Conservative government and is designed to cut £12 billion from welfare spending. From the Labour leadership contenders only Corbyn voted against it while the others abstained which allowed the Bill to pass through the House of Commons more comfortably. This was one of the key moments in the emergence of Corbyn as a serious contender.

in September 2015. In addition to the speech openly containing a number of familiar leftist positions, there was a more immediate qualification: “Fair play for all. Solidarity and not walking by on the other side of the street when people are in trouble. Respect for other people’s point of view. It is this sense of fair play, these shared majority British values that are the fundamental reason why I love this country and its people” (Corbyn 2015). This was delivered shortly after Corbyn had received intense media criticism for not singing the national anthem at a Battle of Britain memorial service and it is telling that, consciously or not, another common aspect of the Radical Bible was invoked and one Corbyn may well have known from his close friend, Tony Benn: the Radical Bible as something home-grown and *British* (or, alternatively, *English*) (Crossley 2014, 20-26). Perhaps the closer to the center of political discourse, the greater the need for transcendent support becomes?

We might add that in the Andrew Marr interview, Corbyn noted another common phrase and construction: the idea that ISIS (or ISIL) are a “perversion of Islam.” This, as we saw, is a common rhetorical move made by Cameron (and, among plenty of others, Blair and Thatcher) and, in the case of Cameron, was also accompanied by an allusion to the Good Samaritan. Once again, the frame of reference is crucial to understanding the meaning. In sharp contrast to Cameron, Corbyn, who has always taken a consistently anti-war stance associated with the left, did not use some construction of Islam to justify the use of violence and military intervention (potential or actual). Corbyn’s version of the “perversion” of True Islam meant instead that he would not talk with ISIS and ISIS would not talk with him; the language of perversion typically implies the perverters are beyond the pale. Nevertheless, Corbyn’s proposed take on dealing with ISIS was through a “political and cultural” campaign against ISIS and to look for ways to cut off funding, arms, and oil revenues. Clearly, Corbyn’s rhetoric is not that expected of mainstream political leaders and it remains to be seen if the structural constraints will allow a Corbynite position and, alongside him, politically radical constructions of religion and the Bible.

Concluding remarks

If Runions’ book were about English political discourses it might therefore be renamed the *Good Samaritan Complex*. What is notable is that, while English rhetoric (certainly in mainstream politics) might be perceived to be tamer, less bombastic, more inclusive, more liberal, less concerned with sexuality, and so on, under the surface a similar game is being played. While Corbyn’s Bible has challenged the hegemony of the Neoliberal Bible, it has not yet toppled it. The Bible still functions as an authority for theodemocracy, invasions of the literal Babylon and beyond, free-market economics, and so on, though probably less explicitly so in the case of issues of anxieties over sexuality, and same-sex marriage in particular. While Babylon may well be more associated with leftist uses of the Bible in the English tradition, the seemingly gentler Good Samaritan makes this possible in a context perceived to involve more widespread scepticism and indifference towards matters deemed religious and biblical. But for all the mystifying liberal rhetoric, this is still the language of power, authority, and domination, and I can only endorse Runions’ suggestion that the demystification

process will have to involve “radical equality...nonheirarchical leadership in collective political collaboration” and will have to find ways that do not make transcendence “the grounds for political certainty” (Runions 2014, 252-53).

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