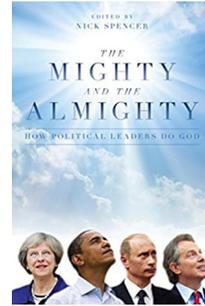


Book Review

Nick Spencer.

The Mighty and the Almighty: How Political Leaders Do God
London: Biteback Publishing, 2017.

Reviewed by, Anthony A.J. Williams. University of Liverpool



The issue of political leaders and their personal religious faith has already been raised in the UK's 2017 General Election. Most notably, Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron has found himself embroiled in controversy over his views, as an evangelical Christian, on same-sex relationships and abortion; Farron eventually conceded he did not believe the former to be a sin, while it was initially left to party colleagues to confirm that he is in fact “pro-choice”.¹ Prime Minister and Conservative leader Theresa May has escaped much of the questioning directed at Farron, but has still been open about her faith: in a recent interview with LBC she spoke of the importance of Christianity in helping her in hard times and in teaching her the “importance of public service”.² It is this issue on which Nick Spencer and other contributors to *The Mighty and the Almighty: How Political Leaders Do God* seek to shed some much-needed light.

Nick Spencer is the Director of Research at religion and society think-tank Theos; as well as editing the volume he provides the introduction and conclusion, along with six of the book's 24 chapters. Each of the other contributors are current or former Theos researchers, including Ben Ryan – who contributes three chapters – as well as Paul Bickley, Maddy Fry and Simon Perfect – each of whom contribute two. The only exception appears to be Andrew Connell, who also contributes two chapters.

Each chapter explores the relationship between Christian belief and engagement with politics in the life of an individual political leader. These include such well-known figures as Margaret Thatcher, Nelson Mandela, Tony Blair and Barack Obama, as well as those with which the reader may be less familiar: Viktor Orbán of Hungary, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, and Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, to name just three. Background information is provided about each individual, with more information given for those lesser-known individuals; this, including both biographical details and historical context, serves as a helpful aid which encourages the reader to engage with the full range of case-studies presented

The volume is brought up to date with chapters on Theresa May and Donald Trump, both written by Spencer. Despite the lack of detailed statements about her faith – or, indeed, her private life in general – the chapter on May is insightful and

- 1 J. Stone, ‘Lib Dems deny Tim Farron is anti-abortion after comments from 2007 interview surface’, *Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tim-farron-abortion-lib-dems-pro-choice-anti-life-christian-gay-rights-sex-lgbt-a7739916.html>, accessed 22nd May 2017.
- 2 A. Williams, ‘Theresa May shares how faith helped with childlessness’, *Premier*, <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Theresa-May-shares-how-faith-helped-with-childlessness>, accessed 22nd May 2017.

informative. This is in stark contrast to the chapter on Trump, which adds little to our understanding of the President's religious commitment, insofar as any such commitment actually exists: Spencer recounts again the evidence of "Trump's patchy and idiosyncratic knowledge of the Bible, his marital and sexual history and his disavowal of the need for repentance".³ In the book's conclusion Spencer describes the tendency for observers to dismiss political leaders' religious profession as only ever an act of hypocrisy as "boneheaded", yet names Trump as the one example from the book in which such a charge could "certainly" be sustained.⁴ One gets the impression that this is a chapter Spencer did not wish to include.

Trump though is the only exception to the rule that each of the figures covered in this volume are treated seriously by Spencer and other contributors. The assumption afforded to individuals as diverse as Mary McAleese, Vladimir Putin and Nicolas Sarkozy is that their religious profession is genuine – even if it is at times employed as a political tactic – and has something noteworthy to teach us. With any volume of this type, however, consistency may be an issue, and not all of the chapters offer the same level of analysis. Bickley's chapter on Mandela, for example, takes a more biographical approach, as opposed to the more analytical style employed by Connell in his chapter on Kevin Rudd, Spencer in his chapters on Thatcher and May, or, indeed, Bickley himself in his chapter on Gordon Brown.

This lack of consistency may result from the lack of a methodological framework underpinning the research, which might have been provided

by the work of David Domke and Kevin Coe on religion and the American Presidency.⁵ Domke and Coe are referenced in *The Mighty and the Almighty*, but only to provide specific historical examples; perhaps this was a missed opportunity to apply their framework to a non-American context. While this lack of an methodological basis does stand as a criticism, however, it must be conceded that the imposition of such on a volume of different case studies contributed by different researchers, aimed at non-academics as much as academics, may have rendered a highly readable work clunky and inaccessible.

The main conclusion to the volume relates to a question which Spencer posits based on the highly-varied accounts of political leaders "doing God": that is, given the diversity of political views expressed, does Christianity really make any difference in their political lives? Spencer's answer is two-fold. Firstly, drawing on his previous work, he explains that while the Bible does not offer an exact political blueprint, it does proclaim two, sometimes contradictory, political themes – freedom and order – and "that these twin impulses towards freedom and order describe much of the theo-political variation we have seen in this collection".⁶ Secondly, while Christian faith initially shapes the political beliefs of an individual, at some point those political beliefs are solidified and the process is reversed: the individual begins to draw from their faith only that which succours their political beliefs. This is an intriguing and credible suggestion, which perhaps offers a basis for further research.

Spencer and the other contributors have certainly put together a well-researched,

3 N. Spencer, 'Donald Trump', in N. Spencer, ed., *The Mighty and the Almighty: How Political Leaders Do God* (London: Biteback, 2017), p.326.
4 N. Spencer, 'Conclusion', in N. Spencer, ed., *The Mighty and the Almighty: How Political Leaders Do God* (London: Biteback, 2017), p.339.

5 D. Domke and K. Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp.18-9.
6 Spencer, 'Conclusion', p.341.

informative and insightful volume. *The Mighty and the Almighty* is also a timely publication, given the growing relevance of religion to politics both international and domestic. The book is accessible enough for non-academics – and it certainly deserves as wide a readership as possible – yet given the varied array of individuals under scrutiny and the relative lack of research into religion and politics outside a US context there will certainly be something of relevance here for any academic reader.

