

1 Article

2 Cameron, Conservatives and a Christian Britain: 3 A Critical Exploration of Political Discourses about 4 Religion in the Contemporary United Kingdom

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9 **Abstract:** In the British setting, the deployment of the phrase ‘doing god’ has become increasingly
10 common to refer to an emerging trend whereby religion has acquired an increasingly prominent
11 role in political spaces and discourses. This was particularly prominent while David Cameron was
12 Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party. While historically, religion has not had a
13 prominent place in either the former Prime Minister David Cameron. Here, the findings from
14 critical analyzing a series of Cameron’s public pronouncements about religion—and Christianity in
15 particular—is set out to try and better understand his own adherence to Christianity (the personal)
16 how this intersected with his politics and role as Prime Minister (the political), and more
17 importantly how this shaped his views about Britain being a Christian country (the national).
18 Contextualised within the embryonic scholarly literature relating to the phenomenon of ‘doing
19 god’ in the contemporary British setting, this article concludes by considering alternative and
20 analogous frames through which greater elucidation of the true motivations of his pronouncements
21 might be understood.

22 **Keywords:** British politics; Christianity; David Cameron; religion; identity; United Kingdom; doing
23 god; British Muslims

25 1. Introduction

26 In the British setting, the deployment of the phrase ‘doing god’ – and conversely, ‘not doing
27 god’ – has become increasingly common over the past decade or so. Gaining traction in political,
28 media and academic spaces, the phrase has become something of a shorthand way of referring to an
29 emerging trend whereby religion would appear to be acquiring an increasingly prominent role in
30 the discourses of British politicians as also in the policies that their respective political parties can be
31 seen to be wanting to implement [1]. One of the first studies to explore this was Allen’s [2] who did
32 so through juxtaposing the outgoing British New Labour government’s public reticence to openly
33 speak about religion and faith to the incoming Conservative-led Coalition government’s somewhat
34 more public and confident approach about ‘doing god’. The main findings were reaffirmed in a
35 similar study by O’Toole [3] a year later. For Allen [4], there was recognition that were this trend to
36 be ongoing as opposed to anomalous to the New Labour and Coalition governments, it would be
37 highly likely that religion would continue to have an increasingly significant impact on the British
38 political – and by consequence, public – spaces in the not too distant future. In reflecting on
39 successive British government’s since the publication of that piece – firstly, the Conservative-led
40 Coalition with the Liberal Democrat Party (2010-2015) followed by two majority Conservative
41 Governments (2015-2017 and 2017 onwards) - Allen’s conclusions would appear to have some
42 credence.

43 There are some notable differences however in the way in which subsequent governments have
44 sought to 'do god'. While New Labour was publicly reticent despite most definitely 'doing god' [5],
45 its preference was decidedly multi-faith whereby it was rather more inclusive of all faiths and none.
46 However, under the three Conservative-led governments since there has been a marked shift
47 whereby the previous multi- has been replaced by a much greater emphasis being placed on the
48 mono-. This has been most evident in the discourses of the two Prime Ministers to have led the
49 Conservative Party during this time, David Cameron from 2010 to 2016 and Theresa May from 2016
50 onwards. Both have oft made speeches that have included explicit – and unprecedented - references
51 to Christianity; the impact it has had on their own personal and political lives and aspirations as also
52 in terms of national identity and their assertion that Britain is a 'Christian country'. Such candour is
53 unusual because as both Bruce [6] and Cooper [7] both note, almost all British Prime Ministers and
54 senior politicians have historically been either unsure of the benefit of bringing religion into the
55 political spaces or have chosen to keep their personal faith separate from their political lives. As
56 Spencer [8] goes on, British Prime Ministers have rarely ever expressed anything more than mere lip
57 service to the Church of England and Christianity more widely.

58 To build on existing scholarly knowledge about 'doing god' [9-12] two themes emerge that
59 warrant further investigation. The first is the unprecedented confidence to publicly 'do god' by the
60 Conservatives. The second, the shift from 'doing god' under New Labour [13] to a much more
61 particularistic approach under Cameron and the Conservatives, maybe even from 'doing god' to
62 'doing Christianity'. This article seeks to critically reflect on these two themes. In doing so, this
63 article begins by setting out how 'doing god' has been manifested in the British political spaces to
64 date before giving some consideration to New Labour's approach to 'doing god', the etymology of
65 the phrase and how it has been utilised. From here, a consideration of how the Conservatives have
66 been 'doing god' will be set out focusing primarily during the period of government from 2010 to
67 2016; placing a greater emphasis on the Conservatives under the leadership of Cameron given that
68 May's tutelage is ongoing and still relatively new. Consequently, a critical analysis of Cameron's
69 public speeches will be undertaken as a means of trying to better understand how his own adherence
70 to Christianity (the personal) can be seen to have intersected with his politics and role as Prime
71 Minister (the political). In addition, not only will the arguments for – and against – Britain being
72 described as a 'Christian country' be considered but so too will some consideration be given over to
73 whether such discourses and declarations have a potential political function. In conclusion, the
74 Cameron and Conservatives approach will be contextualised within the existing albeit embryonic
75 scholarly literature relating to the phenomenon of 'doing god' in the contemporary British setting as
76 also considering alternative and analogous frames through which a better understanding may be
77 available.

78 **2. 'Doing God' Before Cameron and the Coalition**

79 As Bruce [14] puts it, neither has British political culture ever been particularly pious nor
80 showing any fondness for linking British national identity with any particular religion. While so,
81 those such as Furbey et al [15] argue that over the past few decades, the voices of religious actors and
82 organisations have been increasingly evident in the public and political spaces. Largely driven by
83 reforms to public service delivery and greater diversification and involvement of the third sector,
84 those such as McLoughlin [16] note the catalysing effect this had on some within the Church of
85 England towards a greater 'social activism'. As he goes on, this subsequently catalysed other
86 Christian denominations as also some minority religions. In doing so, religious actors and
87 organisations began to explore new ways in order to engage politicians and government. One early
88 development of note was the 1992 collaboration of the Church of England with the Interfaith
89 Network for the UK to create the Inner Cities Religious Council (ICRC). Premised to work
90 collaboratively, the ICRC sought to "[tap] into religious communities' resources – people, networks,
91 organisations, buildings – as a part of urban regeneration" [17]. To this extent, the ICRC was the first

92 structure through which formal representation and consultation took place between government
93 and religious organisations in the contemporary setting [18].

94 It was after New Labour came to power in 1997 however that governmental engagement with
95 duly increased to previously unprecedented levels. A number of different explanations have been
96 posited to explain this including: the inclusion of a voluntary question about religion in the British
97 2001 Census [19]; the disproportionately high levels of social deprivation experienced by some
98 religious communities [20-21]; rising levels of anti-religious – especially anti-Muslim –
99 discrimination and prejudice [22-23]; a growing terrorist threat from those claiming to act in the
100 name of particular religions [24]; and demographic changes following on from mass migration and
101 the establishment of non-historical religious traditions [25-26]. However as Richardson [27] notes,
102 greater engagement with religious actors and organisations ideologically dovetailed with with New
103 Labour's 'Third Way' approach which has to be acknowledged as another important driver. With its
104 emphasis on inclusion and cohesion, New Labour's Third Way justified trying to harness the agency
105 of religious actors and organisations as was evident in 2005 when senior New Labour figures
106 publicly effused the same for being enablers of better community cohesion [28].

107 For Harris et al [29] however, it was another factor that was the primary driver for New Labour
108 'doing god'. According to them, New Labour's greater receptivity was underpinned by "the
109 personal moral and Christian commitment of several members of the government including the
110 prime minister[s]" [30]. Crines & Theakston [31] agree. In support of this relates they explain how
111 Gordon Brown, New Labour Prime Minister between 2007 and 2010 had Christianity so 'hardwired'
112 into his character that his political persona as much as his political trajectory were heavily indebted
113 to his faith's morals and values. While so, they go on to note how during his time as Prime Minister
114 he became increasingly reluctant to speak about his Christian faith for fear of a media backlash
115 similar that experienced by Tony Blair. Like Brown, Blair was a committed Christian prior to
116 becoming Prime Minister and for whom faith had gone on to shape and inform his political career
117 [32]. Unlike Brown however, Blair was rather more comfortable giving voice to this [33]. This caused
118 some controversy while he was Prime Minister between 1997 and 2007. Having been unequivocally
119 told by senior advisers not to discuss his personal religiosity in public after expressing a desire to
120 end his 2003 address to the nation following the invasion of Iraq with the phrase "god bless you"
121 [34], Blair was asked later that year about his Christian beliefs during an interview for Vanity Fair.
122 Before being allowed to answer, Alistair Campbell – Blair's director of strategy and communications
123 – intervened by saying: "we don't do God...I'm sorry. We don't do God" [35]. Campbell later
124 explained that he intervened because "God was a disaster area...British people are not like
125 Americans, who seem to want their politicians banging the Bible the whole time. They hated it" [36].

126 While the notion that successive New Labour governments did not 'do god', a number of
127 commentators disagree [37-39]. Far from the American model that Campbell referred to, New
128 Labour could be seen to 'do god' in rather more low-key and less overt ways, preferring to focus on
129 faith rather than religion [40]. Indicative evidence of this includes the appointment of a 'faith czar' in
130 2001, the publication of good practice guidelines to support better engagement between local
131 authorities and religious actors and communities, the establishment of a ministerial working group
132 to consider the best ways for religion to influence and inform policy-making procedures, and the
133 creation of the Faith Community Liaison Group which spanned government departments for
134 Education, Culture, Media and Sport, and Trade and Industry. Given the impact of earlier public
135 sector reforms and the shift towards greater diversification of both services and providers, so
136 opportunities for religious actors and organisations to be involved also increased thereby - albeit
137 inadvertently - establishing what has become known as the 'faith sector' [41]. In line with New
138 Labour's political ideology, the faith sector was seen to offer added value to the third sector and
139 therefore civil society more widely [42].

140 According to Bhavani et al [43], two types of policy interventions exist: formal interventions
141 which can be categorised as new written policies or legislation and informal interventions which are
142 far more fluid and include different types of projects and initiatives as also certain discourses and
143 narratives. In terms of the latter, one of New Labour's most significant informal interventions was to

144 oversee that governmental consultation and engagement procedures were improved as regards
 145 religious actors and organisations [44]. This was significant in that with this came substantial
 146 investment which sought to build the faith sector's infrastructure. In terms of formal interventions,
 147 these were most apparent in New Labour's centrepiece policy, Face to face, side by side: a
 148 framework for partnership in our multi-faith society [45]. Founded on principles of partnership,
 149 empowerment and choice, four building blocks were identified: developing skills to bridge and link;
 150 shared spaces for interaction; supporting dialogue and social action; and opportunities for learning
 151 to build understanding. With this came further investment including £13.8 million for further
 152 capacity building, £50 million for local interfaith initiatives, and £7.5 million for 'faith in action'
 153 projects [46]. Interfaith underpinned this also. New Labour identified interfaith as the key to
 154 increasing and improving participation and communication thereby having the potential to
 155 "address the kind of destructive trends which undermine national and community cohesion..."
 156 particularly where "...the transmutation of religious identities into the service of identity politics
 157 fuels communal conflict" [47]. So too did New Labour overhaul the equalities framework, extending
 158 the same protections available to those discriminated on markers of 'race' and ethnicity to those
 159 discriminated on markers of religion or belief [49].

160 Despite New Labour's reticence to admit that it did 'do god', O'Toole [49] argues that both the
 161 formal and informal interventions put in place by New Labour had an overwhelmingly positive
 162 impact on the role and engagement of religious actors and organisations in the political spaces. As
 163 she goes on, this was not exclusive to the Church of England or even Christians per se but all
 164 religious actors and organisations that desired to be more politically engaged. Allen [50] agrees
 165 although suggests that 'doing god' presents a problematic dichotomy. Given that 'doing god' goes
 166 against many majority social trends about religion in the contemporary British setting, he asks
 167 whether religious actors and organisations should even have a role in the contemporary political
 168 spaces. While so, he acknowledges that religion continues to perform a significant function for a
 169 significant minority in contemporary Britain and so should be duly excluded from the political
 170 spaces on this basis. Because of this he goes on, it is extremely difficult to easily or completely
 171 dismiss religion out of hand thereby concluding that irrespective of whether New Labour was 'right'
 172 or 'wrong' to 'do god', "a significant part of the legacy of the New Labour years will be how it was
 173 responsible for bringing religion...into the political and social spaces" [51]. For Spencer, "even if the
 174 deity is unlikely to be such a prominent resident of Downing Street after Tony Blair's departure, at
 175 least for the foreseeable future, he seems to have a bright if not uncontroversial future in the public
 176 square" (2006, p.71).

177 3. Results: Cameron and the Conservatives' Discourses

178 3.1. Demarcating the Conservative-lead Approach to 'doing god'

179 For O'Toole [53], the Coalition government – most notably the Conservative majority – was far
 180 more confident in expressing a desire to 'do god' than its predecessor. In fact it was only days after
 181 winning the general election in 2010 that the Conservatives' former Chair – Baroness Sayeeda Warsi
 182 - made this clear. As she told an audience of Church of England bishops:

183 "If anyone suggests that this government does not understand, does not appreciate, does not
 184 defend people of faith, dare I even say does not 'do God', then I hope my schedule this week
 185 will go some way to banishing that myth" [54].

186 Such a declaration did not occur in isolation however. Soon after, she publicly announced that there
 187 could be no doubts whatsoever that the Coalition government intended to be a government that was
 188 content to be seen to 'doing god'. Two years later, she again asserted something similar. Addressing
 189 Pope Benedict and the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy at the Vatican, Warsi spoke about the role
 190 of religion in contemporary Britain: "faith has a proper space in the public sphere...People need to
 191 feel stronger in their religious identities, more confident in their beliefs...". She went on, "...this

192 means individuals not diluting their faith and nations not denying their religious heritage” [55].
193 Seeking to clearly demarcate the Coalition from New Labour, Nelson [56] argues that Warsi was
194 largely responsible for the Conservatives’ newfound religious ‘zeal’. Having been appointed
195 Minister of Faith, her role included overseeing negotiations about a framework for ‘doing God’
196 which included the need for government to promote the ‘normalisation’ of religion as a means of
197 countering the growth of ‘secular fundamentalism’ [57].

198 To suggest this may be to somewhat overstate Warsi’s influence especially if her ever more
199 publicly acrimonious relations with David Cameron – as also the Conservative Party more widely –
200 is anything to go by [59]. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that the Conservatives while part of the
201 Coalition ‘did god’. In terms of informal interventions, a number of those implemented via the
202 Department for Communities and Local Government can be found on two flyers that were widely
203 circulated around 2013. Titled, *Harnessing the Power of Faith Groups* the Coalition boasted among
204 others protecting the rights of councils to hold town hall prayers, implemented sharia-compliant
205 help to buy mortgages and start-up loans, championed Mitzvah Day led by Jewish communities,
206 invested £1.1 million into the Inter Faith Network, and made the persecution of Christians and
207 minorities abroad a human rights priority. As with its New Labour predecessor, there was also a
208 more formal centrepiece policy. Named *Near Neighbours*, it was launched in 2011 with the
209 announcement of a £5 million investment: £3 million with which to fund a number of larger religious
210 organisations already engaged in cross-faith activities, including the Christian Muslim Forum, the
211 Council of Christians and Jews, the Hindu Christian Forum, and the Christian-run project, *The Feast*;
212 £2 million with which to provide religious actors and organisations with small grants up to £5,000 to
213 undertake small, highly localised projects which encourage social cohesion through social action and
214 interaction [59]. A partnership between the Church Urban Fund and the Archbishop’s Council, the
215 programme’s most distinctive feature was how the £5 million budget for localised projects was to be
216 managed and delivered by the Church of England. In doing so, applicants were required to obtain
217 the counter-signature of a parish vicar near to where the project was to be delivered.

218 Three considerations emerge. The first is the extent to which *Near Neighbours* was merely the
219 Conservatives’ much maligned *Big Society* albeit with some rebranding. A core theme in the
220 Conservatives 2010 general election campaign, the *Big Society* focused on community-based
221 initiatives that sought to empower local communities, redistribute power, and promote a culture of
222 volunteering [60]. In doing so, Conservative political ideology could be seen in the idea that ‘big
223 government’ could be duly transformed into ‘big society’ [61]. While so, the *Big Society* was
224 drastically unpopular with voters and so became less prominent in subsequent Conservative Party
225 rhetoric. While some differences are apparent between the *Big Society* and *Near Neighbours*, there
226 are also some similarities. The second not only focused on the unprecedented level of governmental
227 partnership afforded to the Church of England but more so the extent to which that partnership had
228 a political function. Those such as Fox [62] suggest that when political actors and governments adopt
229 a functionalist approach, it is typical for religions, religious actors, organisations, and religious
230 institutions to be reduced solely to what function they are able to perform for politicians and their
231 aims. As he explains, given the function is determined and imposed by political actors and
232 government as opposed to the religions and the actors and organisations associated with them, so
233 any partnership or engagement becomes entirely driven by political ideology and is rather more
234 imposed than engaged. For *Near Neighbours*, the Church of England clearly provided the
235 infrastructure and administration that would have otherwise been provided by a governmental
236 department and so in this respect it was undoubtedly performing a political function. With this
237 comes another issue however. Drawing on Spencer [63], one consequence of this could be that the
238 religious institutions, actors and organisations that perform a function for politicians become ever
239 more accountable to them thereby potentially forfeiting their role as critics of that same government,
240 its policies and practices. This latter point is especially important given the historical willingness of
241 British governments and politicians to sever ties with religious actors and organisations that criticise
242 or challenge governmental policy [64].

243 The final consideration relates to potential barriers that might have been imposed through the
244 involvement of the Church of England as delivery partners. Given the lack of knowledge that exists
245 about the quite specific parish system that applies to the Church of England, the need to get
246 applications counter-signed by parish vicars would have likely presented a serious challenge to
247 non-Christian religious actors and organisations. So too, albeit to a significantly lesser degree to
248 Christian actors and organisations that were not affiliated to the Church of England. O'Toole [65]
249 seeks to lay claim about the exclusion of non-Christian religious actors and organisations by
250 highlighting how in east London, almost all Near Neighbours funding was awarded to Christian
251 organisations. As she goes on to explain, not only did this cause some unease among non-Christian
252 religious actors and organisations but so too as DeHanas et al [66] put it, it also caused unease
253 among a number of Church of England clergy. To support this, they offer two arguments. From their
254 research, it was first shown that Muslim actors and organisations definitely did not know which
255 Church of England parish they resided in and so felt that Near Neighbours was an undemocratic
256 programme. Second, and quite irrespective of whether participants felt that Near Neighbours was a
257 good or bad programme, many felt wholly uncomfortable about the control and power afforded to
258 the Church of England. Most felt the Church was afforded a somewhat privileged position.

259 3.2. *Cameron and the Conservatives: more confident, more Christian*

260 An argument to support the privileging of Christianity and the Church of England in particular
261 is maybe best exemplified in Cameron's discourses about his personal faith and the role of religion
262 in contemporary Britain. Showing an unprecedented willingness to talk publicly about Christianity,
263 not only did Cameron demarcate himself from his New Labour peers but so too did he, as Bruce [67]
264 rightly notes, demarcate himself from almost all previous British Prime Ministers. Referencing the
265 reluctance of Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home, Edward Heath and
266 Margaret Thatcher to speak about religion – either theirs or the country's - Bruce [68] states that John
267 Major was the only former Conservative Prime Minister to have spoken about his Christian beliefs.
268 Noting how this only occurred on a handful of occasions, he draws attention to the fact that on the
269 most prominent occasion that Major spoke about his religious beliefs, it was rather more humorous
270 than confessional, quoting the socialist author George Orwell to illustrate his point. Cines and
271 Theakston [69] also suggest something similar as regards Thatcher also. They explain that when
272 criticised by some churches and Christian groups following the publication of the Faith in the Cities
273 report in 1985, she responded by publicly recounting the story of the 'Good Samaritan' and how the
274 Samaritan had needed to get rich before he could ever have been charitable. As they go on, Thatcher
275 was never interested in big theological questions or sharing her religious views. Instead, she was
276 rather more inclined to ensuring that her ethics were put into practice. Similar might be argued of
277 Major also.

278 Cameron's public confessionals therefore need to be understood as being almost entirely
279 anomalous in the British political setting. Prior to becoming Prime Minister, it is worth noting how
280 Cameron used the metaphor of a poor radio signal – "it sort of comes and goes" – to illustrate his
281 Christian faith [70]. Three years later during his speech to mark the 400th anniversary of the King
282 James Bible, a dramatic change was evident. In it, Cameron referred to three broad elements which
283 became increasingly prominent in most of his ensuing speeches about Christianity: the personal, the
284 political, and the national. Concerning the personal, having stated that he was little more than a
285 "vaguely practising" Christian, Cameron subsequently - and maybe contradictorily - added that he
286 was nonetheless a "committed" Christian albeit one that was not "on a mission to convert the
287 world" [71]. Regarding the political, Cameron addressed the issue of 'doing god' specifically by
288 stating that he disagreed with those "people [who] often say that politicians shouldn't 'do God'..."
289 before adding that "...to me, Christianity, faith, religion, the Church and the Bible are all inherently
290 involved in politics because so many political questions are moral questions" [72]. Concerning the
291 national, Cameron made the explicit link between the King James Bible and Britain. Arguing that the
292 language of the King James Bible was so deeply embedded in all aspects of British culture and

293 heritage, Cameron asserted that “the Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals
294 which make Britain what it is today” [73]. This he went on, was proof alone that Britain was an
295 undoubtedly “Christian country” something that politicians as indeed all members of society
296 “should not be afraid to say” [74]. In direct response to this, the then Education Secretary, Michael
297 Gove, insisted that copies of the King James Bible were sent to every state school across the country
298 [75].

299 An important theme to have emerged out of Cameron’s discourses about Christianity and the
300 nation were those relating to ‘values’. Having previously stated that Britain was founded on
301 ‘Christian values’ he went on to state that the British had for too long been unwilling to put those
302 same values into practice, not least as a means “to distinguish right from wrong” [76]. Referring to
303 the perceived problems of British society and those he believed did not want to be a part of who ‘we’
304 were, he added that Britain had “to be confident in saying something is wrong...” adding that doing
305 so was “...not a sign of weakness, it’s a strength” [77]. In doing so, some questions arise. For
306 instance, to what extent might Cameron have been suggesting that all who live in Britain should be
307 expected to uphold Christian ‘values’? Similarly, to what extent was Cameron inferring that
308 Christian ‘values’ were in some way superior to other values and the religious traditions from which
309 they derive? Despite seeking to incorporate assurances that those with non-Christian or no religious
310 beliefs – and values - were not excluded from what it means to be British, Cameron did state that in
311 the past, the British had been reluctant to criticise or condemn those who were ‘wrong’, some
312 making excuses for them on the basis that they merely maintained “different lifestyles” [78]. Vague
313 and unclear, it would be easy to conclude that Cameron was equating ‘different lifestyles’ with those
314 who were either non-Christian or who came from non-Christian heritages.

315 As before, it is important to remember that there has been a general reluctance in Britain among
316 politicians to associate a particular religious identity with being or what it means to be British. While
317 so, Bruce explains that “once a faith becomes part of what distinguishes one people from another, it
318 can do the important ideological work of making those people feel justified...” before adding how
319 “...religion can provide a satisfying explanation of privilege and power” [79]. In this respect, it is
320 interesting to note the language preferred by Cameron during a speech to Christians attending an
321 Easter gathering at 10 Downing Street in April 2014. As before, Cameron again focused on the
322 personal, political and the national. Personally, Cameron once again asserted his Christian
323 credentials: “[I am] proud to hold a reception for Christians here in Downing Street and proud to be
324 a Christian myself and to have my children at a church school” [80]. Once again going beyond what
325 might have been expected of someone who previously claimed to have a Christian faith that ‘comes
326 and goes’, Cameron spoke about a “special moment...that will stay with me...” before going on to
327 describe a “pilgrimage” he undertook to the Church of the Holy Nativity, a site where as Cameron
328 put it, “our Saviour was both crucified and born” [81].

329 As regards the national, Cameron’s discourse was similar in content and tone to what he had
330 used previously. Reiterating the message in his King James Bible speech, Cameron stated that “we
331 are a Christian country...” before subsequently adding that “...we shouldn’t be ashamed to say so”
332 (emphases added) [82]. While it could be argued that Cameron’s use of ‘we’ was little more than an
333 inclusive acknowledgement of his audience, Leudar et al [83] disagree. As they argue, when such
334 demarcations are evident in political discourse they are typically used as membership categories that
335 implicitly divide and separate ‘us’ from ‘them’. The use of membership categories relating to the
336 ‘we’ was also evident in his focus on the relationship between Christianity and the political.
337 Suggesting three ways to do so, Cameron said “we can do more of in our country when it comes to
338 Christianity”. The first of these referred to the Big Society and how Christianity had the potential to
339 be a catalyst to bring about:

340 “a huge culture change, where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their
341 neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central

342 government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful
343 enough to help themselves and their own communities" [84]

344 As he went on, this was because the principles and values of Christianity and the social activism that
345 Christians are involved in on a daily basis were equitable with those underpinning the Big Society.
346 Maybe somewhat facetiously, Cameron added that "Jesus invented the Big Society 2000 years ago"
347 [85].

348 The second way Cameron suggested Christianity could do more in British society was to work
349 together to stop the persecution of Christians elsewhere around the world. As he went on, as a
350 Christian country Britain had a much greater role to play on the global stage, thereby
351 acknowledging the need to have a more prominent Christian identity on the global stage. It was
352 however Cameron's third way that was most interesting. Noting that it was 'controversial',
353 Cameron explained how he believed that challenges facing the different churches were similar to
354 those facing political institutions [86]. Noting factors that included bureaucracy, policies,
355 programmes, statistics and measurements Cameron announced that to find the solution, "what we
356 both need more of is evangelism" [87]. As he explained:

357 "we can get out there and actually change people's lives and make a difference and improve
358 both the spiritual, physical and moral state of our country, and we should be unashamed and
359 clear about wanting to do that...real moments of evangelism, enthusiasm and wanting to make
360 our world a better place" [88]

361 Adding that "there are some really big things that this government is doing which are about that
362 improving state of the world and evangelism", Cameron concluded his speech by adding:

363 "I hope that I can enthuse political institutions, my party, my government with a sense of
364 evangelism about some of the things we're trying to change in our country and in our world...if
365 we pull together, we can change the world, we can make it a better place. That to me is what a lot of the
366 – what the Christian message is about" [89].

367 It is interesting that at the same time, Cameron reiterated much the same in an article for the
368 Church Times, a British based newspaper for members of the Church of England:

369 "Some people feel that in this ever more secular age we shouldn't talk about [religion]. I
370 completely disagree. I believe we should be more confident about our status as a Christian
371 country, more ambitious about expanding the role of faith-based organisations, and, frankly,
372 more evangelical about a faith that compels us to get out there and make a difference to people's
373 lives" [90]

374 The use of the 'evangelical' and 'evangelism' is striking especially in a political setting that has
375 historically been devoid of personal and political religiosity. As regards personal faith, evangelism
376 typically refers to a Christian preaching the gospel with the intention of seeking to convert others to
377 the faith. In itself, this is extremely problematic and far removed from the atypical British Prime
378 Minister that offers little more than mere lip service to the Church of England [91]. As regards the
379 political, the use of the term evangelism would appear equally inappropriate. As Rogers and Beck
380 [92] note, the coupling of evangelical with the political occurs most prominently in the United States
381 whereby it largely refers to the 'New Christian Right' for whom a biblically-based and theologically
382 conservative form of politics is distinctively associated. It would be difficult to argue that this would
383 apply to either Cameron or the Conservatives' political ideologies and so it becomes even more
384 interesting as to why he chose to use the term more than once. Such is especially interesting given
385 that he juxtaposed his personal faith as "a member of the Church of England, and, I suspect, a rather
386 classic one: not that regular in attendance, and a bit vague on some of the more difficult parts of the

387 faith” alongside greater Christian evangelism in Britain and its political arenas. Sitting somewhat
388 uneasily with someone categorically stating that he was not a regular attendee at church nor that he
389 had good knowledge of his faith, Cameron once again asserted that ‘we’ need to be “more
390 evangelical about a faith that compels us to get out there and make a difference to people's lives”
391 [93].

392 3.3. *A Christian country in context*

393 There are few counter arguments to the suggestion that Britain has historically been a Christian
394 country [94]. This history has a legacy which continues to be evident in the contemporary setting.
395 Institutionally for instance, this can be seen in how the ruling British monarch continues to be both
396 head of the Church of England (and by extension, the worldwide Anglican Church) and ‘Defender
397 of the Faith’. Likewise, the Church of England’s establishment and institutional influence can be seen
398 in how its bishops continue to sit as unelected representatives in the House of Lords. While Davie
399 [95] is right to highlight the extent to which the Church’s influence has significantly waned over the
400 past half century, it still provides something of a religious ‘backbone’ for the country in terms of its
401 institutional and civic function. It is true that Britain’s Christian past has a legacy in terms of its
402 culture too, evident in a myriad ways including the country’s calendar and its major public holidays,
403 almost all of which coincide with traditional Christian festivals. Similar too traditional notions of the
404 ‘working week’ and the need for Sunday trading laws given that day has historically been in the
405 context of Britain and its Christianity, culturally conceived as a day of rest. So too is Christianity’s
406 cultural influence evident in terms of the education sector where in addition to churches being the
407 first institutions to provide free schools for all to attend, both the Church of England and Roman
408 Catholic Church continue to oversee the running of more than a third of all state-funded schools. It is
409 possible to infer similar as regards the provision of social welfare more widely, through the
410 institutions and organisations that evolved out of various churches that continue to work towards
411 alleviating poverty, providing healthcare and supporting those experiencing the highest levels of
412 poverty and deprivation [96].

413 While that history and heritage cannot be denied, the emphasis of Cameron and the
414 Conservatives discourses have been that Britain continues to be a Christian country today. In
415 response to this, evidence can be identified which seeks to support arguments both for and against
416 Britain being a Christian country to the extent that both are rendered somewhat invalid or at least
417 inconclusive. Arguments against Britain continuing to be a Christian country in the contemporary
418 setting might typically focus on how Britain has evolved since the middle of the twentieth century
419 from being something of a mono-faith country to one that is rather more multi-faith. It is not just the
420 growth in numbers of those identifying as being non-Christian but so too the decline in numbers of
421 those choosing to identify as being Christian. The most obvious illustration of this comes from
422 Census data which soundly illustrates that over the past two decades, the number of people – as also
423 the percentage – of those who identify with non-Christian religions of non-Christian has increased
424 [97-98]. In stating that Britain was a Christian country however, Cameron did not deny this noted
425 change in religious identification and the associated demographic. On the contrary, he actually
426 stated that “societies do not necessarily become more secular with modernity but rather more plural,
427 with a wider range of beliefs and commitments” [99]. While so, underpinning this is his view that it
428 is because we are a Christian country that has allowed other religions and faiths to flourish; due to
429 “the tolerance that Christianity demands of our society” and the fact that “religious freedom is an
430 absolute, fundamental human right” [100].

431 Focusing solely on the data, an argument could be made that Cameron was right to describe
432 Britain as a Christian country on the premise that a majority identify as Christian. In the 2011 census,
433 the percentage was 59.2% of the population [101]; in 2001, it was 71.6% [102]. Undoubtedly a
434 significant drop, those who continue to identify as Christian have to be acknowledged as significant
435 especially when the second greatest number of people to identify with a specific religion are those

436 who identify as Muslim which constituted at the time, less than 5% of the population [103].
437 However, if the 25.1% of the country that chose not to identify with a religion are taken into account,
438 the gap between Christians and those – in sum – who do not becomes much less substantial.
439 Consequently, Britain would appear to be moving away from identifying as Christian thereby
440 questioning the extent to which ‘Christian’ is an appropriate descriptor for the country as a whole. If
441 such a decline continues, then it is likely that the majority of the population will – within the
442 foreseeable future – choose not to identify as Christian. Which illustrates the paradox of a growing
443 emphasis on Britain being a Christian country at a time when trends would seem to suggest the
444 country is becoming increasingly less so.

445 Aside from the noted decline, there are some that challenge the legitimacy of the data relating to
446 how a majority continue to identify as Christian. Take for instance the British Humanist Association
447 (BHA) and its concerns about how the question about religion and identification are asked not least
448 for them, this has the ability to shape and determine respondent’s answers [104]. For the BHA, the
449 outcome of this can be that an individual that is not particularly religious and maybe never practices
450 their religion could respond with a positive identification as to their religious identity solely because
451 they have a religious heritage. Likewise, the BHA argues that because the religion question was the
452 only voluntary question on both the 2001 and 2011 Census, those who were not religious could have
453 chosen not to answer therefore being excluded from the reported data. As Allen rightly notes,
454 “despite the high numbers [of Christians], the figures can be misleading as there is a significant
455 disparity between identification as Christian and those that regularly practice their faith”[105]. At
456 best, he intones, it is therefore far more likely that many of those who choose to identify as being
457 Christian are – at most – merely culturally Christian. To this extent, this is what Cameron himself
458 may have been referring to when he stated that he did not attend Church regularly albeit while
459 continuing to consider himself a Christian [106]. Like Cameron’s discourses therefore, the situation
460 in the country would appear to be far from straightforward.

461 **4. Discussion**

462 Unlike Harris et al’s [107] observation that underpinning New Labour’s increased receptivity to
463 ‘doing god’ was the deeply held personal faith of many of its most prominent political figures, the
464 same would not appear to be true of Cameron at least. His public willingness to speak about his
465 personal faith is therefore as unprecedented as it is paradoxical. In terms of being unprecedented,
466 given Cameron described his personal faith as being akin to a poor radio signal Crines and
467 Theakston [108] are therefore right to suggest that the regularity with which he spoke about his
468 Christianity was far more often and recurrent than one might have expected. So much so that
469 Cameron refuted the clearly identifiable and evident trend inherent among British Prime Ministers
470 for either being sceptical of religion or keeping their personal religious beliefs well away from the
471 political spaces [109]. While Blair maybe tried to baulk this also, Cameron’s public statements and
472 discourses were far more overt and wide-reaching than anything that had preceded it. Some broad
473 arguments can be put forward as a means of trying to explain this. Graham [110] for example
474 suggests that politicians typically invoke religion – in particular the values associated with religious
475 traditions – as a means of conveying a sense of trustworthiness to their publics. By communicating
476 the extent to which they hold such ‘values’ dear, they deploy them in order to try and convince those
477 same publics that they are good even when that sometimes goes against other aspects of their
478 personality, character and politics. Maddox agrees by observing how “religious values, even if we
479 don’t ourselves share them, promise sincerity, right-mindedness and safety...” before adding how
480 they are seen to be “...stronger and reassuring...when the world beyond our vulnerable borders is
481 portrayed as teeming with a religiously fanatical, potentially criminal ‘Them’” [111]. It is interesting
482 to note the suggestion here that religion and religious values can be utilised to reinforce the
483 construction of a ‘them’ given that the recurrence of membership categories within Cameron’s
484 discourses had been highlighted previously.

485

486 Cameron's discourses were also paradoxical in that he simultaneously described himself as
487 rarely participating and 'vague' in his understanding of Christianity at the same time as roundly
488 calling for greater and more Christian evangelism. If a traditional understanding of the term is
489 adopted, then it becomes extremely difficult to comprehend the extent to which someone whose
490 personal faith is seemingly variable in intensity could also be seen to be making sincere claims about
491 the need to preach and subsequently bring others to Christianity. While there is no obvious sense
492 that Cameron was doing so, one explanation might be that Cameron was using evangelical and
493 evangelism metaphorically. This too however is also somewhat problematic. If Cameron was being
494 metaphorical and referring to the need to be more zealous or enthusiastic, what then might be the
495 'thing' that his audience needed to be more zealous or enthusiastic about? On scrutiny, there is very
496 little scope for alternative interpretation and so it can only be concluded that Cameron was stating
497 that it was Christianity that he and indeed others needed to be evangelical about. As shown here,
498 every time he spoke about evangelism, he did so while speaking about Christianity to Christian
499 audiences. Had he done so in a different context, then it might have been possible to have argued
500 that he was using the term in an alternative way. Consequently, it can only be concluded that he
501 must have always been referring to Christianity and thereby utilising the concept of evangelism in
502 its traditional, Christian context. Indeed it is worth giving some consideration to how his various
503 audiences might have sought to understand and interpret his speeches their distinct Christian-ness;
504 something that was obtuse to Cameron's own faith and religiosity. Little evidence therefore exists
505 that might go any way to explaining the paradox of why someone whose personal faith amounted to
506 little more than vaguely believing and rarely practising was so keen to call for others to be
507 increasingly evangelical about exactly the same religion.
508

509 While noting the observations of Graham [112] and Maddox [113] about the benefits of
510 invoking god and religion in the political spaces, invoking god and religion can also be seen to be
511 divisive, excluding and preferential [114-116]. Consequently, the oft repeated and recurrent nature
512 of Cameron's discourses clearly had the potential to not only be detrimental but counterproductive
513 as indeed counter intuitive also. Given the equally oft-cited wavering nature of his personal
514 religiosity, so it would seem to have been even more risky especially as those such as the previous
515 incumbent, Gordon Brown – for whom Christianity was seen to have been hardwired into his
516 character and political persona [117] – chose not to speak openly about his personal faith in fear of
517 the damage it might cause. While Crines and Theakston [118] suggest that Cameron utilised
518 Christianity to discern how religion should manifest itself in society, it might be more appropriate to
519 consider his discourses about his personal faith within a broader context. Drawing on Chilton and
520 Ilyin's [119] study, it is typical for political discourses to be implicitly used to encourage public
521 audiences to think about situations that are new or complex while simultaneously seeking to
522 establish common ground or maintaining a sense of reassuring continuity. If common ground
523 therefore something that was being established then given the routine use of membership categories
524 deployed by Cameron, it might be right to question the extent to which Cameron's discourses about
525 his personal faith were part of a wider political discourse which sought to create, as Chilton and
526 Ilyin [120] infer has been historically possible, a common ground that also reassures in terms of
527 establishing some continuity.
528

529 From the outset of the Conservative-led Coalition government, it was clear that it was far more
530 overt both in terms of its intention and indeed credentials for 'doing god'. From Warsi's speech
531 onwards, the same was variously communicated as a means of demarcating itself from New Labour
532 previously. In this respect, it was not seeking to establish continuity with previous British
533 governments. Both Cameron and the Conservatives went beyond mere words and discourses in
534 order to 'do god' however, designing centrepiece policies through which their commitment to
535 'doing god' could be duly concretised. Given both the Coalition and New Labour governments did
536 similar in this respect, O'Toole [121] argues that while it was New Labour which brought religion
537 back into the British political spaces it did so with the lens squarely focused on the multi- as opposed

538 to the mono-. As she goes on, it was however the Conservatives - as the majority within the Coalition
539 – who duly went on to reject the multi- in preference of the mono- whereby the mono- focused
540 squarely on Christianity as opposed any other religion. Given this recognition, it would appear that
541 the Cameron, Conservative, Christianity triptych had the potential of having an alternative function
542 and purpose.

543
544 One way of understanding this continuation of ‘doing god’ albeit while shifting the emphasis
545 away from a multi-faith Britain onto a somewhat more unidimensional understanding of Britain as a
546 mono-faith Christian country is to frame it within the context of what Bruce [122] tentatively
547 suggests is the perception that New Labour’s approach to ‘doing god’ embodied a pro-Islam bias. As
548 he explains, given New Labour endorsed multiculturalism so the argument is that it favoured
549 minority communities – including minority religious communities - over the majority population
550 and by default, the majority religious community also. This majority community one must assume
551 has to be those akin to Cameron in that they were ‘vaguely’ Christian. While there is little if indeed
552 any direct evidence to support such an argument, it is worth noting that Cameron as indeed
553 numerous other Conservatives had not only been publicly opposed to multiculturalism for many
554 years but so too had many gone on record to suggest that even the merest remnants of
555 multiculturalism should be killed off [123]. If the Coalition view therefore was that New Labour had
556 preferred the minority over the majority, then it is possible that the reassertion and reiteration that
557 Britain was a Christian country could be seen to have had a rebalancing function to it and indeed
558 analogous with some of the Conservatives broader and historical ideological policies and
559 approaches.

560
561 It is within this analogous context that Cameron’s discourses about Christianity and especially
562 his deployment of membership categories has the potential to be better elucidated and understood.
563 Where this is most apparent is during his speech to mark the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta
564 and the news stories that sought to report it most notably, ‘Be more British Cameron tells UK
565 Muslims’ [124]. Despite the call to ‘be more British’ being somewhat meaningless – as indeed is for
566 Britain to be more Christian or indeed more evangelical – such sentiments function by appealing to
567 what might be understood as ‘common-sense’. If Bruce [125] is correct is suggesting that the
568 Conservatives felt that New Labour had a pro-Islam bias, by establishing – albeit discursively – a
569 common-sense notion that Muslims are different and separate from who ‘we’ are, so the argument
570 would locate some legitimacy were it to be posited that making those different and separate
571 Muslims more like ‘us’ would result in them being a ‘problem’ being duly ‘solved’. As noted of
572 Gramsci [126], while common-sense appears coherent in that it ‘makes sense’ to the populace,
573 common-sense is typically almost entirely politically-derived whereby it becomes an amalgam of
574 social facts, historical notions and contemporary prejudices that serve to construct a narrative which
575 seeks to capture and embody ‘everyday thinking’. Common-sense therefore tends to be overly
576 simplistic in that it lacks sophisticated argument and intelligent reasoning. As Hall and O’Shea [127]
577 note, giving the illusion that common-sense is derived from ‘everyday thinking’ and ‘real-life’
578 experience however functions by providing answers to the questions of what they refer to as
579 ‘common people’: politicians thereby construct the questions and the problems at the same time as
580 constructing the answers and the solutions. As Allen [128] notes, when it comes to Muslims and
581 Islam in the British setting everyday thinking not only accepts that Muslims and Islam are indeed
582 separate and different from ‘us’ but more importantly, it is their difference and separation that
583 defines ‘them’. Irrespective of whether such notions are true or not, Hall & O’Shea [129] are therefore
584 correct in noting that because political discourses infer that such are true, not only are they accepted
585 without question but so too do they become established as common-sense and thereby concretised
586 within everyday thinking.

587
588 Given that the discourses of political actors and their discourses tell us what we all already
589 think [130], Cameron and the Conservatives’ discourses about Britain being a Christian country and

590 the membership categories associated with therefore sought to routinely deploy hollow and
591 meaningless notions of identity through which they were able to confer legitimacy on the process of
592 demarcating 'them' from 'us'. In doing so, one might suggest that the use of 'Christian country' here
593 functions akin to what might be described as a form of 'new' racism. Conceived by Barker [131], his
594 conception of discriminatory phenomena emerged from his analyses of the political discourses of
595 Thatcher's Conservatives from the late 1970s onwards. Noting how early race relations legislation
596 had begun to criminalise and thereby curtail more overt expressions of racism, he identified a
597 marked shift in how Thatcher's Conservatives begun to refer to and subsequently employ discourses
598 about minority groups. Instead of focusing on historically established markers upon which
599 discrimination was founded – for instance skin colour - Barker illustrated how the Conservatives
600 political discourses increasingly deployed cultural markers of difference to demarcate 'them' from
601 'us'. In this respect, Barker's conception of a 'new' racism was such that it was a discriminatory
602 process which functioned through the accentuation of just how different 'they' – whoever 'they'
603 might be at any given time and juncture - are from 'us'. The process is threefold [130]: it enables
604 political actors to navigate the new landscapes of diversity and legislation while avoiding explicit
605 references to discriminatory markers; it affirms the difference attributed to 'them' is wholly
606 problematic because it threatens 'us' and 'our' culture, values, way of life and so on; and finally, it
607 continues to exaggerate both the difference attributed to 'them' and the consequences experiences
608 because of that same difference. 'Christian country' clearly functions in this way. It avoids all explicit
609 references to 'them' by referring solely to who 'we' are perceived to be; it affirms 'their' difference
610 and the perceived threat presented by it through reiterating and repeatedly reaffirming not only
611 who 'we' are but so too what 'our' norms are perceived to be; and finally, it exaggerates through
612 both repetition and implication that 'their' difference – which is in itself exaggerated – continues to
613 be an ongoing and ever more pressing concern. All of which is possible because the political debate
614 and discourse is framed within the context of it being common-sense. If 'we' are Christian and we
615 need to be able to practice 'our' religion and be more evangelical about it, then there is obviously a
616 need to do so. That need, by consequence, has to be the threat posed by Muslims and Islam and the
617 difference that defines them within everyday thinking.

618 It is for this reason that Cameron's discourses can be paradoxical in that rather than referring to
619 his own personal religiosity or faith, he is instead referring to the notional and symbolic religiosity
620 and faith of 'us'. Through the lens of Cameron's personal, political and national discourses about
621 Christianity and being Christian, he and the Conservatives are speaking to the populace. In doing so,
622 they are not overtly speaking about who 'they' are but instead, speaking about who 'we' are or at
623 least who 'we' are perceived to be. While resonating with Barker [133], Cameron's discourses also
624 seem to invert previous conceptions of new racism through exaggerating who 'we' are in terms of
625 religion – here, Christianity – in order to highlight and demarcate who 'we' are not. The discourses
626 therefore not only fail to make any explicit references to who 'they' are but more so completely
627 bypasses them. It would therefore seem that the at least the discursive element of the Conservatives
628 – and by consequence, the Coalition's – approach to 'doing god' was somewhat more pre-conceived
629 than may at first have appeared. Far from shaping or promoting a Britain that might be relevant and
630 appropriate to today's increasingly diverse society, Cameron and the Conservatives 'Christian
631 country' discourses - and potentially its wider, 'doing god' agenda – instead focused on conveying
632 and establishing in the everyday thinking of the populace a construct of today's Britain that sought
633 to demarcate 'us' from 'them'. Unfounded and untenable in today's Britain, Cameron and the
634 Conservatives drive towards an ever more discursively recognised and accepted 'Christian country'
635 can be seen as something of a forceful and detrimental political mechanism that seeks to
636 differentiate, demarcate and subsequently discriminate..

637

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639

640

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