Should politicians do God?

I am not sure how qualified I am to be here this evening. As I told Canon Carter, when he did me the great honour of inviting me to talk to you, I am an atheist, and have been for as long as I can remember. I am neither proud nor ashamed of this: I am increasingly aware that I suffer from the handicap of all atheists in that I have unquestionably reached that time of life where what we arrogantly consider to be the inevitability of oblivion is coming ever closer, as momentum builds on the Cresta Run to the grave. I am not, however, an atheist in the mould of Professor Dawkins. For all I know I am wrong and I have quite a surprise coming to me at some point in the future; so it would ill-become me to indulge in Dawkinsite behaviour and mock, ridicule and despise those who think there is a God. What I rather like about our country is that we can hold all views on religion, or hold none at all, and we go unmolested for it. I regret that some atheists see religion as a mortal threat, or as a sign of incipient mental illness, and behave accordingly.

I am a historian, and I have for years earned my living writing in the newspapers about politics. In both callings I have studied the interaction of politicians with what is now popularly called "faith". My specialism is 19th and early 20th century history, and as such I have seen what one of the great theologians of my lifetime, Professor Owen Chadwick, famously called "the secularisation of the European mind in the 19th century", and its effects on the way in which we are governed. I find myself giving this lecture at an opportune time, in that we have recently acquired a prime minister who is the daughter of a clergyman, and who goes to church on Sundays as a matter of course and not as a matter of ostentation. Quite rightly, she does not care what people think of her doing this, and by not caring people simply accept it: quite unlike some of our recent leaders, who seemed to think that engaging in any sort of religious observance constituted a potential act of provocation. Mrs Thatcher, brought up a sincere Methodist but who later felt more at home in the Established Church, was the last one who felt able to behave in that way, even though Gordon Brown was a son of the Manse and Tony Blair – well, more of him later. I well recall a *Private Eye* cover just before the 1979 general election, which depicted Jim Callaghan, on a bright spring morning, striding through the lych-gate of his parish church in Sussex holding the hands of his grandchildren. One is saying to the other: "I didn't know granddad believed in God!" The other answers: "Once every five years he does."

Only last week we had an example of the gulf that divides us, and our politicians, from our American cousins and those who represent them in their legislature. When the vice-president elect, Mike Pence, a devout evangelical, came to the podium to introduce Donald Trump to the American people for the first time as President-Elect, he thanked God for their victory. I know God moves in mysterious ways, but whether He would be quite so keen to take the credit for President Trump it is not for me to say. But Mr Pence at least provided me with a contemporary example of how one feature that separates political cultures around the world is the relationship that members of them think, or don't think, they have with God.

We have in this country other contemporary politicians who are not merely religious, but who have a keen understanding of theology, and think deeply about the subject. Frank Field is perhaps the most celebrated: and in his earlier life he regularly engaged in theological discussions with the most toweringly intellectual man to sit in the House of Commons since the second world war, Enoch Powell, whose official biographer I had the honour to be. Powell published numerous books of speeches, two of which – "No Easy Answers" and "Wrestling with the Angel" – are solely on theological matters. Powell saw no contradiction between being a politician – and as I hardly need to point out, quite a controversial one - and being religious, though the fervour of his religious beliefs, as he told me, waxed and waned throughout his life. In presenting himself to an electorate, or simply to a Friday night audience at a constituency annual dinner, he would speak unaffectedly about religion because it was such an important part of his life. And nor was he afraid to admit that his faith had come and gone.

As a textual critic and one of the most brilliant Greek scholars of his generation, he studied the gospels and put his own interpretations on them. As with Mrs Thatcher, who imbibed a more dilute and ready-made theology from her father, his study of religion underpinned the values he brought into politics. Religion for Powell was an important branch of philosophy, and one he applied to his life as a politician; he actively rejected, in his theological speeches, any attempt to deploy religion in the service of socialism; he famously said, from the pulpit of St Mary-le-Bow in London in January 1969, that "Christianity presents a series of absolute commands, so complete, so far-reaching, so absolute, that they are literally unfulfillable." He took as his example – and he could have taken many – Matthew Chapter 6 verse 34, "Take no thought for the morrow", and observed that "the entire economy of the modern state is built up by taking thought for the morrow." He said he refused to swallow the interpretation that Christ, on saying that, was merely addressing his own disciples, and giving them what Powell called "private instruction". He quoted Luke, chapter 22 verse 19, when Christ said "do this in remembrance of me", which Powell argued was taken to be binding upon every Christian. One could not pick and choose. "So there," he said, "straight away I am faced with an impossibility."

Life was, he thought, about "unfulfillable absolutes": it was up to politicians, Christian or otherwise, to seek to manage the state while remaining within a broad interpretation of Christian values. Later in the same discussion Powell observed that "when we say that rich and poor are equal before God we may have stated a truth, but we have not stated anything which will help us, on questions about legislation, to decide between the policy of redistributing income so as to reduce inequality or the policy of maintaining an economy in which inequalities increase thought the standard at the bottom may rise, or a policy of using the power of the state to equalize the economic demands which all the members of the state can exercise…Equality before God doesn't help us to select one or the other of them."

Powell was in no doubt that while Christianity established a set of ideals by which it was admirable to live, there was what he called a "difficulty and indeed impracticability of drawing deductions for political action." Powell was, of

course, most noted by many for his views on immigration, a subject of some concern to us today, and which is believed to have affected the result of the recent referendum on our membership of the European Union. He was attacked for his views that immigration should be restricted, on the grounds that it violated the Christian belief that "all men are equal". He retorted that the law of Christ knew nothing about nations or nationalities at all, and so if one were to deduce that all men are equal meant that all men would have an equal right to enter the United Kingdom, whatever their origins and citizenship, one would have an almighty political problem. What I would say for Powell is that whether in his periods of belief or atheism he conducted his life according to Christian precepts, as I am sure the believer Mrs May does: and I am in no doubt that the governed are fortunate when their governors hold to such precepts, for they can at least, if hypocrisy is absent, expect honesty, probity and compassion.

Powell was speaking just under 50 years ago, and in a public discourse that was unexceptional for its time, in an age when newspapers and television programmes reported intellectual debate such as this as a matter of routine, and were not afraid of stretching the minds of their audience, or telling them something that it might prove difficult to compress into an outburst on Twitter. But if one goes back almost another century, to the time in the spring of 1880 when William Ewart Gladstone became prime minister for the second time, one realises how things had changed in that time, despite Gladstone and Powell having a comparable intellectual grasp of the theological issues that confronted an intelligent person, politician or not. Powell had been in and out of atheism during his life: his mother had become an atheist in his late teens, which started him on the process, and it was compounded by his reading of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer in his 20s. He was a Dawkinsite before Dawkins, his contemporaries in the 1930s and 1940s recalling the contempt with which he received any statements of religious conviction by them. But then Powell had a religious experience in 1949; and by the late 1950s was a fervent Anglican. By the end of his life, and after much more thought and study, the fervour had worn off, and a new generation of scepticism had overtaken his elderly, but still sharp, mind. The Christianity he applied to political questions in his own life and career was always heavily considered, weighed-up, interpreted and re-interpreted.

No so Gladstone. He was every bit as much of a theologian as Powell, but his faith was unquestioned. He would simply put it aside when he realised it was out of step with the changing world: but he had a faith that was, by experience, deeper than Powell's, and less subject to vigorous self-scrutiny. Gladstone's sense of divine motivation drove him. At the opening of parliament on 20 May 1880 he recalled in his diary that "it almost overpowered me as I thought by what deep and hidden agencies I have been brought back into the midst of the vortex of political action and contention." God, he felt, had given him strength to go on in his eighth decade: he said that "Looking calmly over this course of experience I do believe that the Almighty has employed me for His purposes in a manner larger or more special than before, and has strengthened me and led me on accordingly, though I must not forget the admirable saying of Hooker that evil ministers of good things are like torches, a light to others, waste and destruction to themselves." Gladstone was completely without affectation when he said this;

a 20th or 21st century British politician who advertised such a view would be considered something of a fruitcake. When shortly after becoming prime minister again at the age of 70 he became ill from overwork, he told his diary: "I thought of the end", and of course did so with a sense of expectation. While he was ill Mrs Gladstone read to him, at his request, from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

To see Gladstone's practical approach at work, however, consider his administration's sponsorship of the Burials Act of 1880, which (provided a representative of the deceased gave 48 hours' notice to the incumbent of the deceased's parish) allowed interments without the rites of the Church of England, but also to use the rites of the Church to bury someone in unconsecrated ground. It was another recognition by the deeply religious Gladstone of the secularisation of society, and of the departure from accepted practices provoked by the rise of free thought. He exercised his innate liberalism on religious questions as on many others.

The developments of Gladstone's century provided challenges to everyone, but especially acutely to politicians. As Professor Chadwick observed: "Orthodox Christianity was proved untrue because miracles became improbable, and Genesis was proved to be a myth by science, and philosophical axioms were transformed by intellectual processes derived from the Enlightenment, and the intellectual revolution passed from universities to newspaper, and from newspaper to drawing-room, and drawing-room to housekeeper's parlour, the newspaper to working-men's clubs – are ideas what move the souls of men? Or did the working man, thrust by economic development into a new and more impersonal class-structure, develop a consciousness of his class, and distrust or hatred of the middle class, and find the churches middle-class institutions, and start to beat them with whatever sticks lay to hand, and found the weapons of atheist pamphleteers and potted handbooks of evolutionary science?" Even Godly politicians such as Gladstone had to understand what Powell would, a century later, come to see as the incompatibility between a strict interpretation of the gospels and the reality of the increasingly secular and undeferential society with this the politician had to deal, and seek to make some sort of accommodation.

By the 1880s Gladstone found accommodations easier to make: 40 years earlier, as a young minister in Peel's government he had, rather in the manner of the Tudors before him in trying to enforce the rule of the newly-Established church, seen Christianity first and foremost as a means of asserting social control and facilitating a measured and contained form of progress, and therefore indispensable. In a memorandum written in the early 1840s, he had outlined what he believed would happen in a state of "Christianity abolished: 1. Gladiatorial shows. 2. Human sacrifices. 3. Polygamy. 4. Exposure of children. 5. Slavery. 6. Cannibalism." Also in the 1840s, in another undated memorandum, he noted that "in the present, as a critical period, it is more especially expedient to scrutinise our state: not external alone with reference to the common enemy, but internally too, for the foe is everywhere, both where effective Christian principle dwells, and where it dwells not." In another, apparently from the same period, he

reflects upon the pressure that the modern world puts on observance of religion, and in his tone anticipates Powell. "It is impossible for me to fulfil (I use the phrase in the restricted sense in which alone it ever could be realised) all the duty of an English Churchman while I continue in political life: or in other words there are kinds and degrees of co-operation which I might be able like others to render, but which cannot be rendered in my present position."

After the massive upheavals of the industrial revolution, and the destabilisation of traditional parishes caused by a mass migration from countryside to towns between the 1780s and the 1850s, the State fought to maintain widespread religious observance. Since the Church Building Acts of 1818 and 1824 – a response to the fears of the ruling class about the effect of the absence of organised religion and worship in the newly expanded urban areas – large amounts of government money had been granted for the building of Anglican churches in those areas. Although the Chartist movement to an extent anticipated Christian socialism, atheism began to become more apparent among radicals. As the mood in society towards the rejection of God changed, so prominent thinkers such as John Stuart Mill – who also became a Liberal politician, in the same broad church of a party that contained Gladstone - eventually admitted their scepticism about religion. Works by Mill such as *On Liberty* and *The Subjugation of Women* display a cast of mind at odds with traditional doctrine. However, for all that, in the mid 19th century perceptions remained of Britain as an overwhelmingly Christian country.

Mill admitted in his *Autobiography* that his atheism had been hereditary, since his father had realised that he could not believe in God, and had transmitted the feeling to his son. Mill denied that his father had been a dogmatic atheist: his atheism was, "moral, still more than intellectual. He found it impossible to believe that a world so full of evil was the work of an Author combining infinite power with perfect goodness and righteousness." He told Mill, when the latter was still a boy, that "the question 'who made me?' cannot be answered, because we have no experience or authentic information from which to answer it . . . I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has not thrown off religious belief, but never had it."

Mill was, however alert to the potential damage that could be done to a man in public life who strayed from the social orthodoxy of belief in God. Somewhat disingenuously, he told a correspondent in November 1868 that "if anyone again tells you that I am an atheist, I would advise you to ask him, how he knows and in what page of my numerous writings he finds anything to bear out the assertion." Mill's desire for a State with free institutions could not be realised without complete intellectual liberty, and part of that was the right for men to shake off an imposed religion, if they felt the compulsion to do so. He protests in *On Liberty* about the Crown bringing a prosecution for blasphemy in 1857 against a man for writing anti-Christian graffiti on a gate in Cornwall, for which he received twenty-one months' imprisonment (subsequently commuted); and about the discrimination against atheists who could not be sworn as jurymen, one of whom was "grossly insulted" by the judge; and about another denied justice against a thief because he felt unable to give sworn evidence in a court of law. He felt the

law as it stood put those exercising their conscience in the position of outlaws. To the still greater outrage of his critics, Mill defined the great hypocrisy of the age: people professing Christian principles but, in only the rarest cases, actually living by them. He claimed to spot a decline in observance over the history of Christianity. Speaking of the earliest Christians, he wrote that "when their enemies said 'see how these Christians love one another' (a remark not likely to be made by anybody now) they assuredly had a much livelier feeling of the meaning of their creed than they have ever had since."

On the Liberal wing of politics in the second half of the 19th century, such feelings about God were becoming common. Politicians were as alert as any intelligent person about the effect of writings by men such as Mill, and about the impact of Darwin on conventional ideas of belief. In his 1874 tract *On Compromise*, John Morley – then thirty-six, and a leading intellectual of his generation who would serve as a cabinet minister in several Liberal administrations from the 1880s until 1914 – wrote that "religion, whatever destinies may be in store for it, is at least for the present hardly any longer an organic power. It is not that supreme, penetrating, controlling, decisive part of a man's life which it has been and will be again." Morley blamed the rigidities of the Church for failing to allow it to move with the intellectual spirit of the times. "While the spirit of man expands in search after new light, and feels energetically for new truth, the spirit of the Church is eternally entombed within the four corners of acts of parliament." He said this led to a system "that begins by making mental indolence a virtue and intellectual narrowness a part of sanctity, ends by putting a premium on something too like hypocrisy." The result was a Church that was "a political army of obstruction to new ideas".

It was also in this era that the crucible of our democracy – the House of Commons – made its own severance with Christianity as a prerequisite of its workings. On 3 May 1880, as the Commons assembled after the election that Gladstone had just won, one new member refused to follow the procedure for taking his seat: swearing the oath. Hansard reported that "Mr Bradlaugh, returned as one of the Members for the Borough of Northampton, came to the Table and delivered the following Statement in writing to the Clerk: 'To the Right honourable The Speaker of the House of Commons.' 'I, the undersigned Charles Bradlaugh, beg respectfully to claim to be allowed to affirm as a person for the time being by Law permitted to make a solemn Affirmation or Declaration instead of taking an Oath.' And being asked by the Clerk upon what grounds he claimed to make an Affirmation, he answered, by virtue of the Evidence Amendment Acts 1869 and 1870." Bradlaugh told the Speaker, Henry Brand: "I have only now to submit that the Parliamentary Oaths Act, 1866, gives the right to affirm to every person for the time being permitted by law to make affirmation. I am such a person; and under the Evidence Further Amendment Act, 1869, and the Evidence Amendment Act, 1870, I have repeatedly for nine years past affirmed in the highest Courts of Jurisdiction in this Realm. I am ready to make the Declaration or Affirmation of Allegiance." The quibble was about four words at the end of the oath of allegiance, which the juror promised to maintain "so help me God".

Bradlaugh had a long history of bloody-mindedness. He had been a Sunday school teacher, but had fretted over contradictions between the 39 Articles and the Bible. The Anglican clergyman who ran his Sunday school expelled him, accusing him of atheism. If Bradlaugh was not a fully-formed atheist then, this incident, coupled with his family's disgust, accelerated and completed the process. He joined radical societies and by the late 1860s was renowned not merely as a luminary of the Reform League but as a secularist and pamphleteer.

He co-founded, with Annie Besant (who may or may not have been his mistress), the National Secularist Society, and edited its newspaper *The National Reformer*. He and Besant published Charles Knowlton's *The Fruits of Philosophy*, a pamphlet advocating contraception, and were convicted of obscenity. His election in Northampton came at the fourth attempt. However, even before he reached Westminster he was described in the *Sheffield Telegraph* as "the bellowing blasphemer of Northampton", a portent of grief to come.

Speaker Brand's mistake was to fail to rule on the question there and then: but he was clearly afraid to do so without taking the temperature of the Commons. He had been Speaker since 1872 and had the experience to interpret the law. This amoebic reaction would cost him, and the credibility of parliament, dear. Apparently clueless, and fearful of turning MPs against him, he told Bradlaugh to withdraw while the House discussed his case. It was settled that a select committee be appointed to consider whether the Acts cited could be apply to parliamentary oath-taking. The committee, which in a shocking breach of natural justice refused to call witnesses or hear evidence, rejected allowing him to affirm. This was despite Sir Henry James, the Attorney-General, advising that he should, just as he could – and had – in courts of law. The vote was tied at eight all: all seven Conservatives opposed the idea, and were joined by one Liberal. Eight liberals voted for the Attorney's position, but, following custom, the chairman – supported the amendment, which his party had moved. This revealed, unsurprisingly, that the profession of religion or otherwise in public life had become a political football, and not a matter of theological principle.

On 21 May Bradlaugh (having notified Speaker Brand) tried to take the oath, going through what he regarded as a formality of no consequence to him. Gladstone, who understood the forces of secularism, told the Queen (in whom Bradlaugh believed no more than he did in God) this would "relieve the House" of further complications. However, never content to avoid confrontation, Bradlaugh had set out his philosophy in a letter to *The Times* that morning. He claimed many other members felt as he did, but had been afraid to make a stand out of "habit and the fear of exciting prejudice". He would take the oath and "regard myself as bound, not by the letter of its words, but by the spirit which the affirmation would have conveyed had I been permitted to use it."

This caused Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, a Tory who from the moment of Bradlaugh's election had announced his resolve to stop him being admitted, to object to the House being trifled with in this way. He said Bradlaugh was "a professed Atheist" and "by the Common Law of England an Atheist is not entitled to take an oath." Wolff argued that an atheist could not fear the wrath of God and

the certainty of divine punishment; there was no sense of "moral and religious accountability to a Supreme Being".

Gladstone, exposing a rather charming naivete, later told Brand he had not expected such capital to be made by other MPs "out of Bradlaugh's loathsome and revolting opinions." Another MP, Edward Gibson, took great delight in reminding Gladstone that, as Chancellor in 1854, he had said "I revere the principle of the oath. I think it tends to maintain that serious, reverential temper with which men ought to address themselves to solemn duties", and he was keen to know what had changed in the intervening years. All Bradlaugh sought, Gibson and those who thought like him – on both sides – maintained, was to outrage the conscience of the Commons by taking God's name in vain. John Bright, the great mid-century radical, predicted the House would "stand badly with the nation and with history" if it chose to exclude Bradlaugh, and warned it against repeating its mistake with John Wilkes more than a century earlier, when it had him barred for seeking to publish accounts of parliamentary debates.

Gladstone was sufficiently liberal-minded to believe Bradlaugh had a right to his views, and that parliament should not prevent his sitting in a legislature that no longer pretended to be exclusively Christian: Jews had been allowed to take their own oath of allegiance since the 1850s. He knew times had changed, and would not be changing back. Yet he had to tread carefully: Queen Victoria's private secretary wrote to him on 24 May to say how anxious the Queen was that "care will be taken to prevent its being supposed (erroneously of course) that the Government sympathise with the opinions Mr Bradlaugh is stated to hold." Legal wrangling would continue for the following six years. Arnold Bennett, the novelist, recalling the time, wrote: "Than this complication of theology and politics nothing could have been better devised to impassion an electorate which had but two genuine interests – theology and politics. The rumour of the feverish affair had spread to the most isolated communities....In loquacious families Bradlaugh caused dissension and division, more real perhaps than apparent, for not all Bradlaugh's supporters had the courage to avow themselves such."

Bright doubted that the British people, whether working class or the aristocracy, were so burdened by religious dogma that they could care less about Bradlaugh affirming. Gladstone said that an inability to believe in a "Supreme Being" was "the greatest of misfortunes", but the question before the House was not whether an atheist could sit there: it was how to interpret the existing law. Aware of the effect this argument was having on the country, he said his wished above all "to avoid whatever can stir feeling". He described atheism as a "rare form of unbelief in this country", and could not understand why it should be singled out as a form of disability when "Positivism, Agnosticism, Materialism and Pantheism" did not appear to elicit such disapproval.

After this row had dragged on for a year, the House agreed to hear Bradlaugh, from below the Bar. "You have force," he told the Commons. "On my side is the law." He maintained, correctly, that the Tories had turned the argument into a party political one. He protested that the resolution of the previous year could not bind the House any longer. He warned them that "the force that you invoke

against the law today may tomorrow be used against you." This raised the already considerable discomfort, as did his later point that he was being excluded purely because his opinions were "obnoxious." There were rowdy and ill-tempered scenes during the debate. Gladstone said that the finest legal minds agreed Bradlaugh should be admitted. He believed Bradlaugh ought "to be credited with the best and highest motives": it was none of the House's business if he took an oath he could not reconcile with his conscience. He also agreed that the resolution could not be held over Bradlaugh. He warned the opposition that Bradlaugh was right to say that if it could not find legal means to bar him it would find illegal ones; and that there would be consequences for its reputation. Gladstone was shocked by the tone of the debate, describing the occasion as "a bad night: bad acrid intolerant feeling and unseemly squabbles." Not normally one to allow his calm to be violated by such things, he admitted to his diary that he was then "quite upset in the night for once." Eddy Hamilton, his private secretary, found him "greatly worried and distressed".

As the argument wore on, petitions poured in from all over Britain: the people had become greatly secularised, and did not expect their politicians to be forced to be any different. The radical movement mobilised, arranging public meetings that Bradlaugh addressed, and organising an extensive canvass of Northampton to help ensure he won the by-election caused by his expulsion. On 4 March 1882 he won again, and turned up at the Commons. This time a Tory motion to prevent his taking the oath was passed by just 259 votes to 244. On Sunday 14 May between 70,000 and 80,000 supporters attended a mass meeting in Hyde Park, four days after a smaller one in Trafalgar Square. The Liberal press, led by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, called for urgent legislation to allow affirmation, and taunted the government for a lack of courage. The Duke of Argyll, the Lord Privy Seal, eventually tried, and failed, to introduce an Affirmation Bill that July. It was now clearer than ever that, in the British polity, the link between politics and Christianity had irrevocably changed.

In April 1883 the government introduced its own Bill, which it stressed would not be retrospective – Bradlaugh would need to be re-elected – and for the benefit of constituents who would not be deprived of representation by the Commons' preventing their MP from being sworn. An Archdeacon, RW Browne, wrote to Gladstone apparently (his letter is untraced, but we have Gladstone's reply) asserting that the Bill would legitimise or encourage immorality. "To take cognisance of moral conduct in any Law regulating admission to Parliament would be mischievous even if it were not impossible," Gladstone replied. "To allege immorality in connection with atheism and as its fruit would be open to the answer that there are many atheists of irreproachable life."

A naked dislike of Bradlaugh was revealed: such as William Sullivan, the Irish National MP for Limerick, saying he was "astonished that a pious, good Christian like the Prime Minister, at a time when infidelity was spreading in the land, should bring in a Bill to facilitate the admission to the House of a man who denied the existence of a Supreme Being." Lord Elcho said if Scotland were to be considered bigoted for a dislike of professional atheism then he was "proud to believe that Scotland was bigoted". If the House passed the Bill it would be

purely in response to threats from Bradlaugh and from his "impresario" Henry Labouchere, an admittedly louche figure and renowned troublemaker who sat for the other Northampton seat. Henry Fowler, a Liberal MP said the Bill would be tantamount to "a national insult to the God who has made us great", a "disgrace to the country" and a demand "at the bidding of Mr Bradlaugh to renounce the Christian religion of this country".

Gladstone disingenuously claimed Bradlaugh was nothing to do with the decision to have a Bill, provoking Lord Lewisham to ask why in that case the Liberals had not introduced such a measure before. On 3 May 1883 it fell by 295 votes to 292; the Irish largely voting with the Tories to appease their devout and predominantly Catholic constituents, and some Liberals from strong nonconformist backgrounds placating their deeply religious voters. The government's plea to recognise liberty of conscience, the clarion call of the winding-up speech by the Marquess of Hartington, one of Gladstone's most senior colleagues and heir to the Dukedom of Devonshire, was ignored.

In 1884 Bradlaugh won yet another by-election, but there was yet another vote to exclude him. The matter had become entirely party political, the Tories using it now to embarrass the Liberals in the eyes of their own nonconformist supporters. Although he had fierce critics in the country, who despised his free-thinking and saw him as subversive, Bradlaugh won the widespread support and respect of the public. There was a correlation between intellectual enlightenment and defence of his position: The argument stretched into the next administration: when Lord Salisbury formed a new ministry, in July 1885, Bradlaugh attempted to swear again and was excluded again. An election was held that November, and Bradlaugh and his "impresario" Labouchere were once more returned as members for Northampton.

A new Speaker, Arthur Peel, waited until the new Parliament was elected; but when Bradlaugh came to take the oath on 13 January 1886 Peel did what Brand should have done, and directed that the House had no right to prevent him. "I know nothing of the Resolutions of the past. They have lapsed, they are void, they are of no effect in reference to this case." He took Bradlaugh's view exactly: "It is the right, the legal statutable obligation, of Members when returned to this House, to come to this Table, and take the Oath prescribed by Statute. I have no authority, I have no right, original or delegated, to interfere between an honourable Member and his taking of the Oath."

Bradlaugh took his rightful place on the Liberal benches of the House of Commons. In 1888 he succeeded in getting an Affirmation Bill on the statute book, thus effectively secularising the Commons and making a vital extension of the right of freedom of thought. And in January 1891, as he lay dying, the Commons belatedly admitted its shameful conduct, and passed a motion expunging from the record the resolutions it had, in a prolonged fit of self-righteous and cynical hysteria, passed against him a decade earlier.

It is no exaggeration to say that our modern, secular politics dates from Bradlaugh's victory, not least that it was the last time that observance, or lack of

observance, of Christian doctrine was used at length to try to make party political points in Britain. However, our politics has evolved from a time when the established church was a cornerstone of our governance. Prayers are still said daily in the House of Commons, though there is no compulsion to attend them. The Prime Minister takes his or her commission from a monarch who also happens to be Supreme Governor of the Church of England: our head of state – the head of our polity if not the head of our politics – is overtly religious. In reviewing the great developments of the century and a quarter since Bradlaugh and Gladstone we can see themes of policy that relate to the adoption by a secular society of Christian values – notably a welfare state in all its forms, state education and the liberalisation of the penal system. However, since then politicians have tended to follow Gladstone's lead, and make religion a private matter and not adduce it in support of any policy they might be advocating. Given the narrow-minded attitudes that so many in this country hold towards the practice of religion, I fear they may have been wise to do so. Anybody, politician or not, who talks openly about their faith in God these days finds themselves branded an eccentric. It is far less unpleasant than being thrown to the lions, but – in terms of a political career – not necessarily less harmful.

In early 2003 Tony Blair, then the prime minister, was being interviewed by an American journalist who asked him about his Christianity: the word at the time was that Mr Blair was deeply religious – he was, you will recall, parodied as the Anglican vicar of St Albion's in *Private Eye* – and analysed his beliefs so seriously that he was contemplating joining the Roman Catholic church, of which his wife and children were members. His press officer, Alastair Campbell, who was present, intervened and closed the question down with the statement: "We don't do God". Mr Campbell certainly didn't do God – he is a professed atheist – but Mr Blair certainly did: however, his advisers would not let him talk about it. At around the same time it was reported that Mr Blair, on addressing the nation about his decision to support the Americans in the second Gulf War, wished to end his remarks with the remarkably anodyne entreaty "God bless you." Members of his staff told him he could not: one was reported to have said that "you are talking to lots of people who don't want chaplains pushing stuff down their throats".

That objection gets closer to the point than the spin put on the matter by Mr Campbell himself. He has insisted that far from preventing Mr Blair talking about God, he simply wanted to end an interview that had run over time. Mr Campbell has been around long enough to know that politics is about perception: and that whatever may or may not have been the stimulus for his rather authoritarian remark, it is perceived that he was seeking to stop Mr Blair talking about religion. That someone so apparently devout as Mr Blair managed almost never to mention the subject in 10 years as prime minister suggests that someone had decided it should be kept in a cupboard under lock and key. The report of the meeting in which "God bless you" was vetoed went on to say that a theological argument ensued. A Jewish member of Mr Blair's staff rejected the prime minister's assertion that all his team were "ungodly", which provoked Mr Blair to say that his Christian God and his colleague's Jewish one were one and the same thing. This is interesting not so much theologically as politically, for I know

exactly why the Blair team was keen to keep their master off the subject of religion.

The first reason was the "chaplains" point – that it might irritate, marginalise and alienate potential supporters who did not believe in God. The second reason was that some non-Christian believers might conclude that the Anglo-Catholic prime minister – I think that is the fairest term to use to describe him at that time – had a God who was not in fact theirs. No administration in British history had ever sought to be so "inclusive" as Mr Blair's, and minorities of all descriptions were loved and cherished in an unprecedented fashion – though it is another mark of his own theological views that civil partnerships were regarded as acceptable while same sex marriage was not, and in his decade in charge abortion was hardly ever discussed in the Commons, despite enormous pressure to lower the time limit in accordance with medical advances. Had Mr Blair asserted his religion his staff would have feared that Muslims, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Jews, Buddhists and all the rest would have joined atheists and agnostics in feeling alienated. And there is a third, more subtle point. When Mr Gladstone, who really did know something about theology, spoke of it with his friends, it was a normal thing for a highly-educated man of the mid-19th century to discuss. Now, in an intensely secular age, and in a party whose appeal is predominantly at the young and radical, it might look eccentric, and possibly - even worse - elitist. If Mr Blair wanted to make a habit of doing God in public, he should not have made such a point of making his administration so inclusive, and of parading its ill-fated obsession with multiculturalism.

You hardly need me to tell you that this is not the case in either America or the Islamic world. Entire presidential campaigns are disregarded by whole sections of the American population because of the candidate's failure to tick the necessary religious boxes, notably on abortion and same sex marriage. Many Americans greeted with incomprehension and even outrage the strictures recently placed in Northern Ireland on a bakery whose owners had a sincere religious objection to homosexuals marrying each other, and who refused to ice a cake with a slogan advocating this, to them, highly offensive idea. That organised Christianity in the United Kingdom was so slow to come to these people's defence was also a sign of the fear it has of becoming engaged in politics, especially against anything deemed progressive. It was also interesting, during the campaign just finished in the United States, that some religious minorities voted zealously for the three-times married proven adulterer Donald Trump rather than Hillary Clinton, on the grounds that the latter had been unwise enough to state her support for abortion – or, as the Americans put it in one of their more expressive euphemisms that always suggests to me a visit to a sweet shop, "the right to choose".

Both the vice-presidential candidates, Tom Kaine and Mike Pence, are overt and professed Christians, and were chosen by their relatively godless running mates not least for that reason, to show that the tickets were reaching out to America's massive and formidable army of Christians. Kaine is a devout Roman Catholic who laces his speeches with quotations from the Bible in the way that no senior American politician has since Jimmy Carter – who, aged 92, still takes a regular

Bible class in his home town of Plains, Georgia. When asked to name his heroes, Kaine starts with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The church he and his family have attended is a predominantly black one in Richmond, Virginia, because he says they have made a conscious decision to feel like a racial minority, so he can feel like what he calls "our African-American friends." How far that is sincere and how far it is the most repulsive and manipulative form of grandstanding I am, happily, not qualified to judge. I think I know how a comparable statement would be treated here, but then we are a more cynical people, which is perhaps why we are a more secular one. Vice-president elect Pence was at pains during his stump speeches to describe himself as "a Christian, a conservative and a Republican, in that order." He speaks proudly of his "commitment to Christ" made in his freshman year at college. He also calls himself a "born again, evangelical Catholic". I used to think evangelicals and Catholics went together like Jews and Islamists, but manifestly not when you seek to make your voter appeal as broad as possible. Mr Pence was unequivocally anti-abortion and anti-same sex marriage, and he takes an unabashed religious conservatism into the reality TV world of the Trump White House.

America, though, is not alone in making religion so central to its polity. In almost all countries where Islam is the main religion, it is expected that heads of government will embrace it and appeal to God in their speeches and policy pronouncements. In some of those countries a balance is sought between the secular administration of a nation and the influence of religion, though in any country that professes to be Muslim religion must pertain in a way unthinkable in the west, not least because of the sanctions often advocated against those who reject it or mock it. Politics more or less as we recognise it continues nonetheless in countries such as Turkey and Pakistan; in other Arab countries an absence of parliamentary democracy on the western model is normally down to the despotic traditions of the ruling caste rather than because of any consciously religious motivation. Theocracy does exist here and there, notably in Iran, though its grip there seems to be loosening. Only in those benighted parts of the middle east where Islamic State prevails – and it is fortunate that they are becoming fewer – do we see the effect not merely of an unbending interpretation of a prophet's teachings, but of the most unbending version of that unbending interpretation. That it can only be enforced by terror, murder and other violent sanctions would seem to put pressure on Mr Blair's notion that those who worship a God all worship the same one.

In the European context, it might seem to those of us who look at some of our near neighbours – notably those countries such as France and Italy where the Roman Catholic church holds sway and is held in such reverence – that there must be a closer interaction between the religion of the people and the actions of their political leaders. How that would explain Silvio Berlusconi, Nicolas Sarkozy or Francois Hollande I could not begin to explain. For despite the 1905 *loi de laicité* of the French state, French presidents make an ostentatious point of attending national acts of homage and remembrance while committing adultery with pop singers or heading off on the back of a moped to commit the sin of fornication with an actress. And now, as we attempt to keep militant Islam at bay, what is the best way forward: to rally round our traditions of Christianity (which even

atheists such as me regard as an essential and inevitable part of the way we are governed and how we live our lives) or to follow the French example of having enforced *laicité*? I am unequivocally for the former.

When you look at the high incidence of expenses fiddlers, liars, adulterers, drug abusers and general sleazeballs who sit in our own parliament you might be forgiven for thinking that secularism has much to answer for. But before we lament too volubly that the glory is departed, recall what Oliver Cromwell – whom Thomas Carlyle termed "the last glimpse of the god-like in England" – said to the Rump Parliament when he booted them out of the House of Commons in 1653: "You have no more religion than my horse". Whatever we think about earlier times they were perhaps little different from ours, except that in the 1650s no politician would readily admit to having no religion, even if like those of today he more often than not hadn't. But then the civil wars after which Cromwell spoke were essentially wars of religion, between Protestantism and Catholicism; and the victory of Protestantism, an interim one after the death of Charles I to be confirmed after the deposition of his son, James II, nearly 40 years later, perhaps ensured that religion rapidly left the counsels of our nation. Certainly the Hanoverians were a heathen lot, and Robert Walpole, who assumed the role as the first prime minister shortly after George I ascended the throne, was not known for his devotions. He would have that in common with the vast majority of his successors, whatever lip service they have paid to religion. No wonder that, by the early 19th century, our ruling class had become the most accomplished organised hypocrisy on earth, as it clung on to what it considered to be the necessity of a widespread religion as a means of social control, and as a means to safeguard its own position. The desecration of churches by revolutionaries in France when they were not sending the aristocracy to the guillotine had not gone unnoticed here.

I began this lecture by illustrating the different attitudes taken to God by politicians in two sister democracies – ours and America's. I conclude by looking at them again, and observe that in both there is one thing that unites politicians of all parties: that the pursuit of votes is paramount, and if God can be enlisted in that pursuit, then he will. There will, however, be no connection in either polity between invoking God, and acting in a Godly fashion: and this is true in most other western countries. For us to think otherwise would, to plagiarise Dr Johnson, very much be the triumph of hope over experience.