
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

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Should We Disestablish?

For many Evangelicals, the arguments for disestablishing the Church of England appear to be a compelling, open-and-shut case. However, Tim Yates urges us to reflect on the case against disestablishment, and traces an important strand of thought among twentieth-century Anglican Evangelicals in favour of sustaining the link between church and state.

In 1977, the Nottingham Statement of the National Evangelical Anglican Congress read: 'we hope that our church will not seek to renounce, but to share with other Protestant churches, the ancient constitutional ties that establish her as the church of this realm. We value these, not for privilege but for service, not for the church but for the nation. We look beyond the secularism of the present day to a day when the English people shall again seek the substance as well as the name of the Christian of Christian faith.'[1] Yet since this was written, I suspect that there has been a sharp change in Anglican evangelical and in general views of the establishment. In what constituted a straw vote in the 1995-2000 set of sessions of the General Synod, during a debate that I had initiated on the reform of cathedral chapter 'elections' of diocesan bishops, I judged from my place on the platform that something in excess of a third of the synod would have voted for disestablishment. In the Anglican evangelical world, there has been the vocal and persistent advocacy of disestablishment by Bishop Colin Buchanan. Many will have read his book *Cut the Connection*.[2] As synod comes to debate the issue again in the July session of 2002, it is important to ask: have all Anglican evangelical thinkers of recent times held to this approach? If not, why have they felt differently? What has been the general development on these issues since, say, 1900 in the Church of England?

Anglican Evangelicals and Establishment

As a contrast to much talk of disestablishment, two alternative views rehearsed in the 1980s Latimer House studies are examined here. Raymond Johnston was an able educationalist, deeply committed Evangelical and member of the General Synod, as of the Church Assembly previously. In his study *Nationhood: towards a Christian Perspective*, he noted a concern 'not so much for the state but the nation.'[3] He recognized that in our day nationalism and patriotism invited 'a wary defensiveness', while the roots of nationhood have 'shrivelled'.[4] The preference is

1 Nottingham Statement, para K7.
2 Colin Buchanan, *Cut the Connection*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1994.
3 O. R. Johnston, *Nationhood: towards a Christian Perspective*, Latimer House, Oxford 1980.
4 Johnston, *Nationhood*, p 4.

for an international forum or intermediate groupings (such as NATO or the EU). Nevertheless, detachment from the experience of nationhood was 'impossible by virtue of our human condition... we are... of a given age and culture and we belong to a given community.'[5] The task he set himself was therefore to establish 'the Biblical parameters of the concept of a nation.' His examination of the Bible, which highlighted Acts 17:26, led to the conclusion that 'in the light of the picture which Scripture paints... any aspiration to abolish... nationhood must be rejected.'[6] He quoted Karl Barth: 'Christian ethics cannot espouse an abstract internationalism and cosmopolitanism.'[7] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his Nobel prize lecture, had said that 'nations were the wealth of mankind, they are its generalized personalities (embodying) a particular facet of God's design.' Johnston wrote that if God had approved national identities, the existence of a national church is not anomalous: given its freedom to criticise and to proclaim the gospel, 'an association with the life of the nation can be a valuable asset to both church and community.'[8] He quoted the sociologist of religion, David Martin: 'Christianity may be a religion which rejected the religion of Caesar or the exaltation of the ethnic group but... it must be positively related to the national consciousness, particularly as this is highlighted in a myth of national origins. A positive overlap with the national myth is a necessary condition for a lively and widespread attachment to religion: the majority of people cannot bear too sharp a contradiction between their universalistic faith and their group identity.'[9] The Russian historian Vadim Borisov, who had lived under Leninist Communism, had written of the Russian experience: 'the destruction of the Christian base of the nation could not but have disastrous consequences for its later history.'[10]

Max Warren had given some lectures in Westminster Abbey on establishment and Raymond Johnston introduced these in another Latimer House study.[11] Warren quoted T. S. Eliot: 'a church once disestablished cannot easily be re-established, and... the very act of disestablishment separates it more definitely and irrevocably from the life of the nation than if it had never been established. The effect on the mind of the people of the visible and dramatic withdrawal of the church from the affairs of the nation... the church's abandonment of all those who are not by their wholehearted profession within the fold – this is incalculable; the risks are so great that such an act can be nothing but a desperate measure.'[12] Max Warren's analysis then followed. With notable clarity (and recognizable evangelical preference for the alliterative) he described the functions of the national church as (1) to prophesy, (2) to purify, (3) to prepare. A nation is an entity and nations are part of the providential ordering of life in a biblical understanding of history. National self-consciousness, like individual self-consciousness, is something good in itself, however much it has been distorted to evil ends.[13] F. D. Maurice had written that

5 Johnston, *Nationhood*, p 7.
6 Johnston, *Nationhood*, p 20.
7 Johnston, *Nationhood*, p 18. The quotation is from Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, III.4.12.
8 Johnston, *Nationhood*, p 24.
9 Johnston, *Nationhood*, p 2, quoting from D. Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization*, Blackwell, Oxford 1978.
10 Johnston, *Nationhood*, p 2.
11 Max Warren, *The Functions of a National Church*, Latimer House, Oxford 1984.
12 T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Faber and Faber, London 1939, pp 72f. Warren, *Functions*, pp 11f.
13 Warren, *Functions*, p 17.

the state was 'as much God's creation as the church'. Both stand under God. P. T. Forsyth, whom Warren quotes on a number of occasions, had written that 'the normal relation of state and church should be "not divorce but true marriage"... marriage of the kind in which amid due intimacy, personal respect is never lost.'[14] One role of a national church was to remind the nation that no policy could be more foolish than one which is pursued solely in the supposed interest of that nation (a lesson which President George W. Bush has been learning in a steep learning curve since some of his early pronouncements). Secondly, to purify. The church's vocation to be salt and light must make her a defender of civil liberties,[15] because a realistic and Christian view of power requires it. The church has to learn to avoid complicity through supplying blessings to actions of the state, a costly ministry (as, for example, Archbishop Runcie experienced after the Falklands service of thanksgiving). The church has a role in sustaining the concern of the nation for, for example, the underprivileged people of the world (a role acknowledged recently by Clare Short, the minister responsible for overseas development and aid). The church needs to counteract the sense of estrangement among individuals and 'loneliness', analysed by Lord Beveridge in his report *Voluntary Action*, a kind of *anomie* which has lost roots and has no sense of obligation to the wider community. It should be a community 'possessed by the peace of God because it is certain of that purpose of God for the world which is the rule and direction of its own life.'[16] Finally, the church needs to prepare the nation for rapidly-changing circumstances such as the integration of citizens of different ethnic origin and ultimately for the judgement of God and his reign, to bring a sense of the eternal to a 'technologically-conditioned age'.[17] He concluded: 'the primary question in regard to the relation of the church to the state is not about the freedom of the church. The primary question is about the obedience of the church to its divine vocation to prophesy, to purify and to prepare, for this vocation cannot be fulfilled from "outside". The principle of the incarnation applies here also, that redemption implies involvement with all its costliness.'[18] Warren asked, 'is it unreasonable to expect that it will be a church which is recognizably "of" the nation which will best reveal Christ to the nation?'[19]

General thinking since 1900

There have been a number of reports on church and state since 1900. The first, of 1916, was chaired by Lord Selborne; that of 1935 included in its number on the commission William Temple, George Bell and Vernon Storr; Sir Walter Moberly chaired a commission of 1952, which included Professor Norman Sykes and Dean Selwyn in its membership. Professor Owen Chadwick's commission of 1970 included bishops Gerald Ellison and R. R. Williams and Sir Timothy Hoare. They are examples of English gradualism and reform by evolution. The 1916 report paved the way for the legislation of 1919 which produced the Church Assembly, precursor of the General Synod, and PCCs. The 1970 report resulted in the Crown

14 Warren, *Functions*, p 21.
15 Warren, *Functions*, p 26.
16 Warren, *Functions*, p 29.
17 Warren, *Functions*, p 33.
18 Warren, *Functions*, p 35.
19 Warren, *Functions*, p 36.

Appointments Commission, whereby names for diocesan bishoprics come from the church to the Prime Minister, a situation refined by Archbishop Coggan and Sir Norman Anderson, when James Callaghan agreed that he would choose from two names submitted but retained the freedom to choose the second.[20]

One of the most stimulating treatments of the whole church-state issue, which has been so central to Byzantine and European civilization, was that of J. N. Figgis, who discerned the perils of the state as manifested in the twentieth century before its horrifying manifestations in Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Germany.[21] An eloquent defender of so-called 'Caesaro-papalism', as exemplified in the Eastern Empire, was the evangelical scholar S. L. Greenslade, a member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Theological Literature (Max Warren's brainchild) in his F. D. Maurice lectures, 'Church and State from Constantine to Theodosius' of 1953, in which he wrote: 'let us not be too quick to (think) a dualistic theory (that is, a division of church and state) solves all problems and let us be willing to scrutinize it in the light of an ideal which has its own nobility and is far too easily caricatured as Caesaro-papalism.'

Since then, notable contributions have been made by Professor Adrian Hastings and Lord Habgood on the side of retaining the establishment. In his *Church and Nation in a Secular Age*, the archbishop feared a lurch into denominationalism by the Church of England if it was disestablished.[22] He made effective use of the distinguished free churchman Daniel Jenkins, whom he called a 'Welsh dissenter', who had 'castigated the Church of England for trying to sidle quietly out of the responsibilities of establishment' and for being 'more interested in herself as an institution than she is in England.'[23] Disestablishment is a doubtful way of gaining freedom to minister to the nation. For Habgood, being established is an 'inescapable responsibility which the Church of England inherited and which has been a major factor in making her what she is.'[24]

Adrian Hastings, who contrasted with Daniel Jenkins' nonconformity in his background of Roman Catholicism, had a grasp of English political and religious history from Saxon times. He had listened to the arguments advanced against establishment but in the 1991 edition of his remarkable book *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990*, he wrote: 'there are voices raised today, both within and without the Church of England, calling for an end to establishment. The arguments given are powerful and attractive ones. It remains, nevertheless, the hesitant conviction of the present writer that they are fallacious. Both Christianity and English society would be further weakened without any real compensating advantage if what little now remains of the church's establishment was cut on principle away. The Church of England would also be repudiating too much of its past history and that is never wise to do, especially in a time of admitted weakness. Anglican priests retain very widely a sense of responsibility for the whole of society

20 Written parliamentary answer, 8 June 1976.
21 *Churches and the Modern State*, Longmans Green, London 1913.
22 J. S. Habgood, *Church and Nation in a Secular Age*, Darton, Longman and Todd 1983, p 97.
23 Habgood, *Church and Nation*, p 99.
24 Habgood, *Church and Nation*, p 100.

and all that is in it which goes far beyond what most ministers of other churches feel; it is a sound sense which even in its present practical ineffectualness should not be disparaged. Christians of other traditions might do better to help salvage, rather than dismantle, what survives of the Church of England's 'national' character. *Ecclesia Anglicana* should not go out of business. England would be vastly impoverished if compelled to adopt the formal secularity of France or America.[25] In his Prideaux lectures of 1990 in the University of Exeter, 'Church and State: the English Experience', he saw the post-Chadwick Report era since 1970 as a revolution in the relationship of church and state. He noticed the change of tone in Robert Runcie between an espousal of disestablishment in an address to the diocese of St Albans as bishop in 1977 and a speech in the General Synod in 1988, after closer experience of church-state relationships as archbishop: 'much heat has been generated about the nation's partnership between church and state... the church has been gradually achieving the ability to order its own affairs without seeking to break off the partnership.[26] For Hastings, the pluralist society of our time is characterized by Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Jews who 'prefer some establishment to remain as a public symbol of the importance of religion.'[27] Establishment remained, in his view, a symbol to the nation 'which we would be fools to dismantle.'[28]

Conclusion

In a seminar at which I was once propounding the tribal and structural approaches to mission of people like Bruno Gutmann and Christian Keysser, Michael Perry, then Archdeacon of Durham, and editor of the theological journal *The Church Quarterly Review*, said in discussion: 'what is establishment but mission to the structures?' It is a question which perhaps archbishops, prime ministers and monarchs are best placed to answer. It can be argued, and has been eloquently by Archbishop Lang among others, that there is a sense in which the state has a soul, which can be reached. Lang wrote: '[the state] has an organic unity and spirit of its own and that character and spirit are built up by tradition and associations running far back into the past... a sort of subconscious continuity which endures and profoundly affects the character of each generation of citizens who enter within it. The question before us... is whether just there, in that inward region of the national life... there is or is not to be this witness to... some ultimate ideal which it professes. It is in our judgement a very serious thing for a state to take out of that corporate heart of its life any acknowledgement at all of its concern with religion.'[29]

This returns us to where we began in the Nottingham Statement. Our concern should not be so much with the church, which would survive were the state to dispense with establishment. Our concern should be with the state, whose 'inward

25 A Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990*, SCM, London 1991, pp 664f.
26 Hastings, *History*, p 67.
27 Hastings, *History*, p 64.
28 Hastings, *History*, p 76.
29 C. G. Lang in the House of Lords debates of 1913, quoted by Habgood in *Church and Nation*, p 101.

region' (Lang) the church had vacated. At present, the church has been given freedom to order its worship. The only names which are considered for appointment to diocesan bishoprics come from the church. The government wishes for a still substantial representation of bishops on a reconstructed second chamber. It has shown its support for the extension of church schools, as advocated by Lord Dearing. Establishment remains, in Hastings' words, 'adequately but not overwhelmingly defensible on grounds of doing quite a lot of good and very little harm'.[30] This article will have succeeded in its limited aims if it has reminded some readers that 'cutting the connection' is by no means universal orthodoxy for Anglican Evangelicals and that significant thinkers from this tradition have valued the connection with the state; that such views have been shared by some of the wiser heads of the post-1950 English Christian community, ranging from a nonconformist theologian to an eminent Roman Catholic professor of theology and including an archbishop of acute mind, well placed to have known the realities at first hand; and, finally, that it has in general been the genius of the English not to proceed by radical discontinuities with the past but rather to value the complex and intricate developments which names like Cranmer, Hooker, Maurice and Temple represent. The danger is of a modern iconoclasm, which fails to understand truly what it threatens to destroy. The establishment is certainly not beyond criticism, as my own small efforts to reform dean and chapter 'elections' taught me. We should at least digest the views of Hastings and Habgood, of Johnston and Warren, before proceeding to judgement.

The Revd Canon Timothy Yates retired as Canon Emeritus of Derby Cathedral in 2000. He was chairman of the Editorial Board of *Anvil* from 1991 to 2001.

30 Hastings, *Church and State: the English Experience*, University of Exeter Press, 1991, p 76. Paul Avis, *Church, State and Establishment*, SPCK, London 2001, came into my hands after this article was written, but is a welcome and spirited defence of the value of establishment.