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Churchman

EDITORIAL

This year marks the Queen's golden jubilee, and inevitably there has been a good deal of media speculation and comment about the future of the monarchy, and not least about its continuing connections with the Church of England. In the nature of things, golden jubilees are rare occurrences, but they are not as uncommon as one might think. Since 1760 there have been nine sovereigns, but three of them (George III, Victoria and Elizabeth II) have celebrated golden jubilees, reigning for a total of 174 years, which leaves a mere sixty-eight for the other six! Even the middle ages, when life was generally much shorter than it is now, there were two kings (Henry III and Edward III) who made it to fifty years on the throne, and Edward III actually celebrated that fact by relieving the church of some of its tax burdens! That is unlikely to happen this year, but it is a reminder to us that the links between the crown and the church go back a long way, and to separate one institution from the other is not nearly as easy as some facile commentators seem to think.

Of course, the church would survive without the monarchy—it already does so quite successfully in most parts of the world, and there is no need to suppose that things would be any different in England if that day were ever to come. Whether the monarchy could survive without the church though, is a more difficult question to answer. A great deal of nonsense has been spoken recently about the royal title 'Defender of the Faith', much of it (unfortunately) by its next holder, but this merely confuses the issue. The royal link with the Church of England has nothing to do with that title, which was bestowed on Henry VIII by a reluctant Pope Leo X, as a thank you for Henry's willingness to speak out against Martin Luther. When Henry later broke with Rome he kept calling himself 'Defender of the Faith', and so it remains to this day, its original purpose long forgotten.

The true bond between the crown and the church is revealed by another part of the royal title, *Dei gratia* or D.G. as it appears on coins—'by the grace of God'. In legal terms, this means that the sovereign holds office by the sanction of the church, a sanction which is given in and through the rite of coronation. In other European monarchies, where church and state have a different relationship, there is no coronation. A new monarch merely swears to uphold the constitution and is then invested as a kind of life president. But in Britain,

the sovereign has to be acceptable to the church, which in practice means that he or she must follow public standards of Christian morality. These can be strict, as Edward VIII discovered, to his cost. Though never himself married, he could not wed a divorced woman whose previous husband, or in that case husbands, were still living. This was not a rule devised for the monarch alone; it was (and theoretically still is) meant for all church members. Edward would not conform, the church refused to crown him, and he was forced to abdicate—a conclusion which was first made public by the then Bishop of Bradford.

At the present time we are faced with an even trickier situation, in that although the heir to the throne is technically a widower and therefore free to remarry, the woman he would like to have as his wife not only has a previous spouse still living, but was also a factor in the Prince of Wales' divorce. Nobody can pretend that an unhappy man has gone through a difficult situation, and now has at last found contentment with someone quite unconnected with that earlier trauma. On the contrary, she was there all along and was at least partially instrumental in causing the trouble to begin with. The significance of this is not lost on the public, which has consistently wished Prince Charles every happiness—with his chosen partner if he so wishes—but which has also made it quite clear that it does not want her to be queen beside him. Private happiness and public duty are in conflict, and most people seem content to keep it that way.

All of this makes Prince Charles' recent musings about reigning as 'defender of faith', and his sponsorship of a nebulous organisation called 'Respect', seem more than passing strange. A man who does not respect the moral teachings of what is supposed to be his own faith is unlikely to respect those of others, which will almost certainly be different and may even contradict them. If charity begins at home, then so does respect, and experience shows that it is usually those who care most deeply about their own beliefs who are the most sensitive to the scruples of others. Certainly if the heir to the throne were to treat another religion's practices with the same sense of detachment he reserves for the norms of the Church of England, he would be unlikely to win many friends among their adherents, and would probably be accused (not unjustly) of making them seem ridiculous.

The 'defender of faith' idea almost certainly has little or nothing to do with any

genuine religious belief. What we are dealing with here is that politically correct imperative of modern British society which goes under the label 'multiculturalism'. In practice, this means that numerically small but highly visible pockets of ethnic minorities must be kept from rioting in the streets, something they are liable to do if they are not happy with the way British society is treating them. The fact that some of their number may be willing to join the Taliban, and that many of them left their homelands to escape the kind of religious and social oppression which their native 'faiths' encourage is regarded as totally irrelevant in this context. Britain is different, and a tolerant society must be prepared to allow the preaching of intolerance, in the hope that it will be rejected by the vast majority.

Unfortunately, this logic, which allows us to tolerate the British National Party or Sinn Fein, does not work in the same way when we have to deal with ethnic minorities which are more or less securely attached to another world religion. The links between unemployment among Asian youths in Lancashire and Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East are too complex to be reduced to the categories of liberal Western tolerance, and hoping that everyone will just live and let live is simply unrealistic. We have to remember that it is centuries of Christianity which have produced the tolerant atmosphere in which we want to go on living, and that our conceptions of 'live and let live' have very real (if not always obvious) limits.

As Christians, we believe that every person is made in the image and likeness of God, and that therefore the conscience of each individual must be respected. Belief cannot be forced by any human means, because only God can speak to the condition of the heart. We do everything we can to further this of course, but in the end there is no way of ensuring that it will work. Similarly, there have been people who have tried to prevent the Gospel message from being preached, but they too fail in the end—the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

These basic facts are universal truths which apply to everyone, but not all other religions recognise this. Islam, in particular, is highly coercive, and it can be demonstrated that where other religions have come into contact with it, that tendency has rubbed off. Medieval Christendom learned the art of holy war from the Muslims, and in recent years Hinduism has developed a militancy which is quite at odds with its own traditions. It is by no means inconceivable

that before long there will be clashes on British streets between Muslims and Hindus, as there have long been in India, and where will the ‘defender of faith’ be then? Religious beliefs cannot be standardised (and thereby neutralised) as easily as modern secularists would like to think, nor can they be wished away. The world is locked in a spiritual battle for the hearts of men, and that battle will continue until Christ comes again, to take up his kingdom and to judge the living and the dead.

In Britain we have been fortunate in that, over the centuries, the state has been led by people who have formally professed that faith and committed themselves to defend it. They have not all been model Christians by any means, any more than other holders of high public office have been, but that is a different question. The church cannot compel anyone to believe, and has no right to expect that its supreme governor, chosen by an accident of birth, will prove to be the kind of leader we need. That is one reason, of course, why he or she has no real power to influence things one way or another. All we can reasonably ask is that the holder of the office should respect what it stands for and conform, if only outwardly, to those demands. Obviously, if that person is also a converted believer, so much the better, because then outward conformity and inward conviction will be united. But inward conviction is something we can only pray for, and ask God to grant—it is not something which we can impose at will.

But if external means like legal sanctions can only be used to deal with external issues, that does not mean that they are unimportant. Those who are encouraging Prince Charles to think that he can have his cake and eat it too are doing him and the institution he represents an enormous disservice. Appearing to be modern and tolerant, they are, in fact, walking into an abyss of self-destruction which will only become apparent once they have fallen into it. In this situation, it is the duty of those in the church who are able to, to press this truth home as much as they can. It will not be popular, and the delicate nature of the subject means that it will be best handled as privately as possible. It may well be that one of the results will be a call for disestablishment from those who think that Christian morality should not be allowed to stand in the way of individual freedom of choice. If that happens, then so be it.

Many centuries ago, Queen Esther was faced with a similar demand, and she initially recoiled from it. Mordecai had to remind her that she would not

escape the consequences if she failed in her duty, and he was even bold enough to suggest that she had been elevated to her high position precisely in order to allow her to do the right thing on behalf of her people. Today, the leaders of the Church of England have a similar, if much less bloody, challenge placed before them. Is there anyone in their ranks who will be bold enough to stand up and say that a professing Christian finds respect for others in and through faith in Christ, and not in spite of it? Will anyone say that living out one's own presumed beliefs is a better way to achieve an understanding of others than an attitude which suggests that none of them really matters all that much? This is what we need to hear, and this is what will strike a responsive chord with the vast majority of people, who respect sincerity and consistency even if they disagree with the principles concerned, and who will honour the king who upholds what he is crowned to do, whatever personal sacrifices that commitment may entail. Prince Charles will not be king for fifty years, but let us pray that future generations will not be forced to look back on his reign as the beginning of the end of the most venerable institution in our public life.

GERALD BRAY

NOTICE

The Autumn issue of **Churchman**, 116/3, will mark the **450th Anniversary of the 1552 Book of Common Prayer**. The Cranmerian Experiment, though brief, has formed the basis of liturgical worship ever since.

Leading scholars have been commissioned to contribute articles covering such topics as Cranmer's doctrine of repentance, Canon Law reform in 1552, and more recent liturgical developments, among others.

This issue will be of interest to all who have a concern for Reformation history and doctrine, and for those who are using liturgy today.

Additional copies may be ordered from the office, for £6.00 each, plus postage and packing.

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