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# *Disestablishment: A Contemporary View From the Free Churches*

NIGEL G. WRIGHT

The issue of disestablishment has not been a burning issue for recent heirs of the Dissenting tradition despite the historic commitment of that persuasion to the 'separation of church and state'. The tendency in an ecumenical climate has been to see it as something Anglicans must work out for themselves; it might be bad form to make an issue out of it. Establishment might even be seen as a charism which the Church of England brings to modern Christianity, a charism which is certainly a given of history and possibly even God's gift in history. Many Free Church people might be glad that there exist some institutional bulwarks to the growth of secularism; God is at least acknowledged in the unwritten British constitution through its institutions. What might the alternative be if not the further triumph of secularism?

My purpose here is to reflect from a Free Church perspective upon a debate in the General Synod of the Church of England during the July Group of Sessions in 1994. A private member's motion proposed by Colin Buchanan, assistant bishop in the diocese of Rochester, was particularly close to Dissenting concerns. He proposed:

*That this Synod request the Standing Committee to bring forward proposals for the lifting of direct State control -*  
*(a) upon the appointment of diocesan bishops; and*  
*(b) upon the authorization of legislation coming from the Synod.*

Currently, the Crown Appointments Commission recommends two names to the Prime Minister in order of preference for appointment as diocesan bishops, allowing the Prime Minister the final decision. Similarly, Parliament retains the power to accept, or reject without amendment, legal changes to the Church of England's constitution, including its doctrine. These conventions are the remnants of the State's<sup>1</sup> prerogatives over the Church of England. Bishop Buchanan recommended their removal.

I had the honour of observing the Synod for the Baptist Union of Great Britain and was present throughout the debate. My reflections are based upon that participation and subsequent reading of the official record.<sup>2</sup> I

1 When the word 'State' is used with an initial capital it refers in this article to the English State unless the context indicates otherwise. Similarly the word 'Church' on its own usually refers to the Church of England.

2 *Report of Proceedings: General Synod July Groups of Sessions Volume 25 No 2*, hereafter identified as RP.

examine here Buchanan's argument for the motion, analyse the responses to it and then offer reflections from a Free Church perspective on the content of the debate and its omissions. To avoid complexity I shall refer to amendments (all of which were rejected, as indeed was the unamended motion) only as is relevant.

### The Buchanan argument

Buchanan's argument in moving the motion aimed at removing obstacles to understanding its true intent. He did not intend, he indicated, to debate an abstract notion of disestablishment, a word which provokes reactions of horror without even being understood. Nor was the motion a first step towards disestablishment. It said nothing about the monarch's supreme governorship of the Church. Rather it advocated further steps along the road upon which the Church was already travelling<sup>3</sup>, the road towards incremental self-government as distinct from government by Monarch, Premier or Parliament. The last Church and State commission, the Chadwick Commission of 1970, proved divided on the appointment of diocesan bishops. Some wished a Church body, such as the Crown Appointments Commission, to recommend one name to the Prime Minister, some two, and three dissentient members of the commission favoured cutting the connection altogether. At the York Synod of 1974 the Synod itself voted by 270 votes to 70 that the decisive choice should belong to the Church itself. The political leaders of the slightly later time when these sentiments were represented to government (James Callaghan, Margaret Thatcher and Jeremy Thorpe) insisted however on maintaining ministerial privilege through the submission of two names. Very considerable discretion was thus left in the hands of the Prime Minister.<sup>4</sup> Buchanan's motion proposed further movement towards self-government: the Prime Minister should play no role in appointing diocesan bishops, so removing the Church from direct State control. The State currently possesses the power to block what the Church through its own Commission wishes to do. The suspicion therefore attaches to every diocesan bishop that they owe their position to the politically motivated choice of the Prime Minister.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Parliament possesses real powers over the doctrine and life of the Church of England, to the embarrassment of many members of the House.<sup>6</sup> The ironies here are legion. Parliament represents four nations: it constellates combinations of members such as Tony Benn, John Gummer, Ann Widdecombe and Ian Paisley (and in the past Enoch Powell) in coalitions which, according to Buchanan, are not formally competent to take theological decisions for the Church of England and which produce 'an alien, disconnected body with powers over us but little responsibility, not formed from our members, not participating in our debates, not Christian, not

3 RP p 304.

4 RP p 306.

5 RP p 307.

6 RP p 305.

theological, not accountable to anyone for its decisions, and not even confined to the same territory as the Church of England'.<sup>7</sup>

The clear cut issue contained in Buchanan's motion was 'whether, before God, such power of choice of our chief pastors ought to reside with the Prime Minister at all'.<sup>8</sup> That power is one which should be in the hands of the Church alone. Until such time as the changes advocated by Buchanan are achieved, the Church, he claimed, is to be likened to a colony. The moral issue at stake is whether it is right on the one hand to keep a colony in a colonised condition or on the other for that colony to lie down under the colonising power or to seek its freedom.<sup>9</sup>

### Responses to the motion

As a Free Church observer, the argument put forward by Bishop Buchanan sounds to me self-evident. Is he not simply calling for the Church to be free? As the debate reveals, there were those who shared this response. Indeed although the motion was decisively defeated by 273 votes to 110, the vote in favour was hardly insignificant. Some opposition came from Synod members unable to contemplate further change so soon after the votes on the ordination of women had bruised the Church and left its Anglo-Catholic wing badly demoralised. For others the issue was a red herring distracting the Church from its proper work.<sup>10</sup>

Canon Bob Baker of Norwich believed it theologically unjustifiable that MPs who were Buddhists, Jews, Methodists, Roman Catholics or whatever should determine Anglican Church affairs.<sup>11</sup> Clear support came from the Bishop of Hulme, Colin Scott, who argued that disestablishment had taken place *de facto* by the end of the last century after the repeal of the Test Act, the rendering of the Church rate as unenforceable, and the separation of local government from the Church vestry. The removal of these discriminating privileges was entirely right. The substance of establishment now amounts to twenty-six bishops in the House of Lords, a situation likely to be changed by the next government. The Church of Scotland, also according to Scott (although questionably) a church by law established, is a model of a national church with a parochial system and a national witness yet without the price paid by the Church of England.<sup>12</sup> This is the kind of arrangement that he was seeking.<sup>13</sup>

There were others who favoured establishment in principle but were prepared for changes to the present arrangements. Mr John Smallwood of Southwark could contemplate requiring the Archbishops to *consult* with the Prime Minister while *retaining* the nomination of names to the Sovereign.

7 RP p 306.

8 RP p 307.

9 RP p 308.

10 RP p 317.

11 RP p 321.

12 RP p 319.

13 RP p 320.

James Callaghan's argument that the Prime Minister should have the final choice because diocesan bishops would succeed to the House of Lords and so needed to be under Prime Ministerial control, was, in his view, specious. There are eight hundred hereditary peers, three hundred life peers and only twenty-six bishops in the House of Lords. The hereditary principle ensures that there is no control of the House of Lords.<sup>14</sup> But Smallwood wished here a return to the tradition of the Archbishops advising the Sovereign directly while keeping a voice for the Church 'as of right' in affairs of State.<sup>15</sup> The Revd John Broadhurst from the Anglo-Catholic tradition re-articulated Keble's position that the church should be self-governing and self-regulating. Yet he defended the notion of 'Christendom'.<sup>16</sup> The former Provost of Southwark, David Edwards, in moving an amendment to the motion calling for a commission to keep the situation under review, agreed with Buchanan that whether or not the connection with the State should be cut completely, it was certainly right to end the two practices he had attacked.<sup>17</sup> Since the Labour Party was proposing extensive constitutional reform, not least of the House of Lords, some new constitutional arrangement appeared likely. The Church would do well to be prepared for this. To 'let the tide of time wash away what is wrong', was, he thought, wet.<sup>18</sup> The Church of Scotland has been recognised by Parliament as the national church without being under any kind of state control.<sup>19</sup> It enjoys the same kind of arrangement that the Buchanan motion was seeking for the Church of England.

These responses were reasoned discussions of the issue. On the whole, however, they were unrepresentative in their openness to change. The debate revealed the enormous emotional investment that is placed in establishment. Buchanan's motion was represented as the thin end of the wedge, with much of the debate concentrating upon the wedge rather than its thin end. This was clearest in an apocalyptic speech by the Rt Hon. Michael Alison MP, Second Church Estates Commissioner. On the one hand he defended in a reasoned way the competence of Parliament as an alternative and complementary representation of the civil community alongside the Synod which represented more narrowly the Christian community. On the other hand he painted a picture of the Church declaring UDI, opting out of the civil community and finding itself facing a scurrilous battle with parliamentary forces with a vote turning at the end of the day on a combination of prayer and dirty tricks. The result would be a large detonation which would leave the Church damaged.

When a well-functioning but discreetly located central heating boiler suddenly blows up in a house, everybody quickly discovers where that central heating boiler is and how important it is; but meanwhile the hot water, in a great network of hidden pipes and radiators, turns

14 RP p 445.

15 RP p 446.

16 RP p 460.

17 RP p 312.

18 RP pp 311, 313.

19 RP p 314.

cold and a pervasive, irreversible, even deadly, chill begins to settle over a great house.<sup>20</sup>

This speech was not particularly well received, even by the Archbishop of York who declared himself not totally convinced by its apocalyptic scenario. John Habgood was, however, in his own way equally alarmist and feared for the kind of message Buchanan's motion would send to the nation. There was, he believed, still enough mileage in the nation's commitment to its Christian heritage for it to be foolish further to undermine it. A secular state is undesirable.<sup>21</sup> There is mutual advantage in the Church's offering to the State a moral and spiritual basis and to the Prime Minister's bringing to the Church a national perspective to balance the purely ecclesiastical concerns of the General Synod. The present arrangements do reflect the dual concern for church and world which is the key to the Church of England's identity and its mission. It is helpful to have Parliament protecting the rights of ordinary citizens in relation to the Church. The Church of England belongs to the English people. Even simple changes can trigger off other changes which may not be desirable.<sup>22</sup>

This last argument we might describe as the 'argument from unravelling' and it has been employed at various points of the debate. The Archbishop of York saw a delicate constitutional balance between Crown, Parliament and Church maintained by symbolism, historical precedence and historical linkages.<sup>23</sup> The consequences of disturbing such a delicate balance could be grave. The Bishop of Lichfield, Keith Sutton, saw establishment as an opportunity to serve and nothing should be done which would unravel this opportunity.<sup>24</sup> This was echoed by the Dean of Wells for whom the very nature of the Church of England was at stake in the motion. Its historic character would be undermined. The Church was protected by establishment from sectional forces and was enabled to criticise government from within the structure of power itself. Establishment was therefore a special gift of the Church of England to be exercised for the good of all churches. It should be a platform for the re-conversion of a nation turning its back upon God.<sup>25</sup> For the Bishop of Stafford the motion symbolised a 'strategy for disengagement' and 'a curious kind of purism' and would undermine the Church's opportunities at the local level as much as at the national.<sup>26</sup> It was this fear of where the motion would lead that appears, at the end of the day, to have predominated. The Archbishop of Canterbury's speech summed it up in suggesting the Church should not be seen or heard to be cutting connections but using those connections for the glory of God and the sake of others.<sup>27</sup>

20 RP p 310.

21 RP p 314.

22 RP p 315.

23 RP p 316.

24 RP pp 444f.

25 RP pp 454f. See also Sir Timothy Hoare p 452.

26 RP pp 458f.

27 RP p 448.

It is to the Synod's credit that it recognised at points how far the debate had strayed from the precise issues that were under discussion, as was humorously identified in a speech by Elaine Storkey. Declaring herself struck by the stream of prophecy pouring out from Synod she declared:

Five prophecies have struck me particularly. One that English people will lose their sense of belonging to the Church; two, that the ship of State will somehow come unloosed; three, that the ballot box will become God; four, that central heating boilers will begin to explode everywhere; and five, that Britain will move into a new ice age. What, I ask myself, brings on this cataclysmic effect? Well, the cause of this unexpected trauma is that the Prime Minister will no longer appoint bishops. I am absolutely staggered, amazed. I had, frankly, no idea that John Major was exercising such charismatic leadership.<sup>28</sup>

Colin Buchanan, in proposing the motion, anticipated the specific objections that would be raised. He also identified a particular trait of the Church, namely the belief that 'all reforms up to the present have been good and health-giving, but the logical next steps proposed for the future are dangerous and to be resisted'.<sup>29</sup> The debate accurately bore out his observation.

### **Underlying theological issues**

Having gauged the response to the motion, it is my intention now to identify some of the underlying theological issues and to relate them to the Dissenting tradition. Here I wish to identify three areas to do with the church, the state and the nature of Christian mission.

#### *The church*

I cannot take issue with the contention that underlying the motion were some basic perceptions concerning the nature of the church. The sense that the motion advanced a fundamental shift was not without substance. Prior to the Synod Buchanan published a thorough work<sup>30</sup> in which he made his long-standing opposition to establishment clear. Although he could correctly claim that his motion was not commanding disestablishment<sup>31</sup>, it is no surprise that his opponents, some of whom who no doubt, had read his book, were seeing beyond the motion. David Edwards, in arguing for a commission was seeing through to this deeper dimension, seeking a more theological appraisal of the situation.<sup>32</sup> Prebendary John Pearce had a point in arguing that if the Church wished to be free of the State connection it should face the issue squarely and do it thoroughly.<sup>33</sup>

This underlying ecclesiological tension made it possible for several to

28 RP p 461.

29 RP p 304.

30 *Cut the Connection: Disestablishment and the Church of England*, Darton Longman and Todd, London 1994.

31 RP p 468.

32 RP p 311.

33 RP p 326.

characterise Buchanan's position (even if obliquely) as 'very unhealthy sectarianism' and as a 'sincere but misguided religious fervour' which was inclined to take the church too seriously and to reduce it to a holy club devoid of concern for the world.<sup>34</sup> It is this contention with which I wish to engage and where much confused thinking is found.

The assumption is that either the church is established and thus shows its concern for the civil community or that it is a gathered church or sect which has renounced all such concern. This is a parody of the theological options and of the realities of history. If taken seriously, as Buchanan makes clear in his summing up, it identifies all churches other than the Church of England as sects. Indeed, it makes establishment necessary for the church's *esse*, something which has never been claimed in any theological tradition. If the current form of establishment is the only way of avoiding a sectarian fate it means that all other churches in England are sects, including the Roman Catholic Church, as are the Church of Scotland, the Episcopal Church in Scotland, the Church in Wales, the Church of Ireland and indeed Anglican Churches in every province of the Anglican Communion bar England alone. None of these Churches are linked to the state in the way that the Church of England is.

The word 'sect' functions as the 's-word' of ecclesiological discourse and contributes more heat than light to most discussions. This is because a *sociological* term is used as if it has *theological* significance. It connotes a small, inward-looking community which lives for itself and denies responsibility for the civil community. The term 'gathered church' for one of my own heritage is a noble term by no means to be associated with world-denial. The church comprises those who are gathered by Christ and around Christ in order to share in his mission to the world. It is to the credit of Sir Timothy Hoare that, while opposing the motion, he regretted the use of the word 'sectarian' as a 'boo word' and identified the Dissenting concern for the separation of church and state as a 'respected tradition' with its own strategy of mission to the nation.<sup>35</sup> It is a matter of historical record that Dissenters have been profoundly concerned for the nation's life, have struggled for it, have left their indelible and beneficial mark upon the national life and its institutions and at times, such as with the Liberal Government returned in 1906, have been on the verge of gaining political ascendancy.

The highly influential typology, propounded by Ernst Troeltsch, which distinguished between 'church', 'sect' and 'religious individualism' as ideal types within Christianity<sup>36</sup> encouraged a tendency to divide Christian traditions into 'church' or 'sect' boxes. The use of the word 'church', is bound for the Christian to carry a normative significance and so convey the notion of the deviance of the sect-type. The impression is created that there is an all-or-nothing relationship to culture. To reject an aspect of existing culture, say the

<sup>34</sup> Revd Peter Townley: RP p 318.

<sup>35</sup> RP p 452.

<sup>36</sup> *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches Volume I*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1931, p 331.

right of the state to govern in the church, is interpreted as a rejection of all culture. That is plainly nonsensical. A more fluid understanding of the relationship of church to culture is suggested by Johnson's sociological definition: 'A church is a religious group that accepts the social environment in which it exists. A sect is a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists'.<sup>37</sup> This continuum suggests that every church will assume sociologically sectarian characteristics in so far as it embodies a form of life which is at variance with its environment. Churches which do not do so are unlikely to be conformed to Christ and not, as Paul says, 'to this world' (Rom. 12: 2).

Here is the problem with the Revd Peter Townley's contribution to the debate. He could see no difficulty with the State making appointments in the Church because 'the State is no less open to the Spirit of God and divine guidance than the Church'. Indeed, things are better when the State is more involved.<sup>38</sup> The logic of this would be to make the Church an extension of the civil service. Why not let the State do it all? Objections to this understanding come not only from the Free Churches. The Church of England is an anomaly in that even 'churchly' traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Anglo-Catholicism stress the distinction between the holy, catholic church and the worldly powers. If the church is the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, it is distinguished from fallen governmental powers. This implies that only the church has the competence to govern itself.

The arrangement between the Church of England and the State is Erastian (so named from the Swiss theologian Thomas Erastus 1524-83). It embodies the ascendancy of the State over the Church in ecclesiastical matters. That position was adopted at the time of Henry VIII's break with Rome and was defended in Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594). It is sufficient to my purpose here to point to the unacceptability of Erastianism both to Dissent and to Catholicism. Erastianism may be given some theological justification in societies where the civil and Christian communities are coterminous and Parliament might claim to represent the laity, but it is unconvincing in a religiously diverse or even plural society. Strikingly few participants in the debate, including the Archbishops, attempted to justify the Church of England's situation *theologically*. To that extent the main argument advanced by Buchanan in moving the motion remained unanswered and even unaddressed at the end of the debate. Some, indeed, acknowledged that if they were starting from scratch they certainly would not have chosen the present arrangements.<sup>39</sup>

If the word 'sect' undercuts the debate by introducing a theological swear word, 'Erastian' might well be acknowledged as an equal and opposite bo-

37 B. Johnson, *American Sociological Review*, vol 13 (1974), p 542 cited by A. Snyder 'The Monastic Origins of Swiss Anabaptist Sectarianism', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol 57 (1983), p 6.

38 RP p 318.

39 RP e.g. Dr Philip Giddings: p 327.

word.<sup>40</sup> In his book Buchanan acknowledges this, but also believes that it accurately describes establishment in twentieth century England. Erastianism is widely judged, says Buchanan, to be a heresy.<sup>41</sup> However the numbers are juggled, the established Church is a minority church.<sup>42</sup>

Since the end of the nineteenth century the Dissenting position has often, following Camillo Cavour<sup>43</sup>, been designated as the desire for a 'Free Church in a Free State'. Although objections were raised to Buchanan's use of the term 'State control' in his motion<sup>44</sup> he was correct to defend the use of this term and to name the reality to which it points.<sup>45</sup> The present arrangements must be judged in the light of the theological doctrine of which they are the faint echo. If Erastianism is wrong, these remnants of it are wrong. There is therefore an issue of principle. As Buchanan said in his closing speech, 'If it is right in itself, we ought to vote for it, whatever the consequences.'<sup>46</sup> State prerogatives in the government of any other church body in this country would be deemed to be an exceeding of its legitimate role.

### *The State*

This brings us to a discussion not of how the church might be distorted through state control, but of the reverse case. What does the establishment of the Church of England imply for the State? Some of the strongest elements of the debate are here to be found: the belief that the Church has a duty to the State, in the words of Canon John Sentamu, 'to hold in trust the moral and spiritual values of a civilised society'<sup>47</sup>, or of the Revd Sam Prasadam 'to have the State, the Parliament, turning to the bishops and to the Church to ask their opinion on various questions that affect our lives'.<sup>48</sup> Dr Philip Giddings acknowledged that the links of Church with State are untidy, illogical and inefficient but nonetheless they provide an essential and continuing reminder at the heart of Government that there is a dimension to accountability additional to that to the electorate. A state without church links would be one that is wholly secular.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the Archbishop of York indicated that he did not wish a secular state, nor did he believe this to be the wish of other-faith communities. A secular state cannot avoid moral drift.<sup>50</sup>

40 *Cut the Connection*, p 14.

41 *Ibid.*, p 22f.

42 *Ibid.*, p 59.

43 Cavour (1810-1861) was a Piedmontese statesman and first prime minister of the united Italy. In making Rome Italy's capital, separation of church and state was his answer to the problem of the papacy. He saw the liberty of the Church, its spiritual existence and renunciation of temporal power, as the means of renewal of the world and revival of humankind. Pius IX did not respond positively: *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia Volume 2*, (15th edition) Chicago 1990, pp 976-978.

44 RP e.g. pp 308, 325, 450.

45 RP p 305.

46 RP p 468.

47 RP p 456.

48 RP p 451.

49 RP p 327.

50 RP p 314.

This markedly paternalist argument appears to me the strongest, pragmatic ground on which a case for some form of establishment might be built. Indeed this argument has sometimes been represented even in Baptist circles<sup>51</sup> and is undoubtedly widely and informally held by grassroots Free Church people. The Roman Catholic church historian Adrian Hastings has, as one who has opposed the monism of church and state that has characterised much of church history, developed a compelling argument that an established Church obviates a merely private religion and maintains the tradition of social responsibility.<sup>52</sup> Provided therefore that the Church of England undergoes some reform to remove Erastianism (the kind of reform, one imagines, advocated by Buchanan) and provided it fulfils increasingly an ecumenical and representative function within a religiously plural society, a weak establishment such as now exists might maintain sufficient distance from the State to symbolise a transcendent dimension and check the monistic tendencies of the secular. Paradoxically, this serves precisely the opposite, critical purpose from the monism which has been establishment's weakness in the past.<sup>53</sup> Hasting's powerful argument partially parallels the Archbishop of York's point<sup>54</sup> that within today's ecumenical climate what each church or denomination does must be done on behalf of the whole Christian community. The Church of England brings to the ecumenical commonwealth its experience as an established church and, provided it regards its position as a stewardship on behalf of all, this establishment, itself an accident of history, may be justified.

It should be noted that Hastings' proposal would be dependent upon the Buchanan motion being passed and implemented, for only in this way could the ecumenical stumbling block of Erastianism be removed. However, I confess to being somewhat suspicious of an argument that says *precisely because establishment is now weak* it is justifiable. In other words, when establishment was strong and confidently supported it was self-evidently justifiable. Now it is weak it is still justifiable, but for precisely the opposite reason. Establishment remains but its ideological justification changes. Yet I proclaim myself impressed by Hastings' argument: I can see the attraction of the Church of Scotland's form of 'establishment', if that indeed is what it is. Before returning to this I wish to raise questions about state and society and the nature of a so-called secular state.

A necessary distinction which the debate time and again neglected was that between society and state. These two categories were collapsed to the point that to cut the connection between Church and State could only be construed as disengagement from the civil community, from society. Yet the state is only one aspect of society and might be described as society's outer rim. The church by its very nature is involved in society and cannot disen-

51 H. Martin 'Protestantism and the State', *Baptist Quarterly*, vol 12 (1946-48), pp 316f.

52 'Church and State in a Pluralist Society', *Theology*, vol 95 (1992), p 170.

53 *Church and State: The English Experience. The Prideaux Lectures for 1990*, University of Exeter, Exeter 1991, pp 63-66.

54 *Church and Nation in a Secular Age*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1983.

gage. To abolish establishment altogether would not alter this fact. Nor would disestablishment mean disengagement from the state. Not only is it the case that many Christians are involved in its administration and bring their witness to that task but, as Elaine Storkey pointed out,<sup>55</sup> opportunities to represent Christian viewpoints to government are not dependent upon establishment but take place frequently from all points of the Christian spectrum irrespective of established status. To dispense with establishment would not of itself alter this and might even lend greater impetus to it. Secularisation, so greatly feared by many, is not a function of government but a process which is taking place in society at large. It will not be addressed, according to Storkey, by clinging to 'the Prime Minister's role in appointing bishops or to Parliament's ratification of Christian doctrine' but by preaching the gospel and loving human beings.<sup>56</sup> A Christian sense of responsibility for society is not a consequence of establishment, neither is it taken away when establishment is removed. It comes from faith in Jesus Christ and belief in his mission to the world.<sup>57</sup>

Here we turn to the notion of a secular state, which a number of participants, including the Archbishop of York, declared undesirable. But, as Buchanan indicated, what do we have now if not a secular state?<sup>58</sup> And in what ways has an established church prevented us from reaching this point? The logic of the Dissenting position points, it seems to me, precisely in the direction of a 'secular' state in that it removes religious confession from the legitimate sphere of government. It distinguishes between public and private spheres not by restricting movement out of the private into the public but the other way round, by limiting the right of the public realm to invade the private conscience and convictions of persons. This is not the classically liberal or Conservative claim that religion and politics must be kept apart. It is an affirmation of religious liberty which limits the legitimate spheres of the state's activity. It also rejects attempts to achieve specifically religious ends through the use of state power.

The concept of the secular state therefore needs to be analysed more carefully than is usually the case. The 'secular state' means that the state belongs to this age (*saeculum*) and has a function to fulfil in this world. This establishes both the dignity and the limits of the state. It ought not to assume a status or significance beyond this limited role, particularly not by using religious symbolism. A secular state is the alternative to a religious or sacral state, such as is advocated in most branches of Islam and, historically, by the majority churches of Christendom. It is not of itself anti-religious nor incompatible with a religious vision. It derives historically from Enlightenment revulsion against the carnage of the European religious wars and aimed to find the points of consensus which people could share beyond the specifics of their religious confessions. Its task is to be *religiously impartial*,

<sup>55</sup> RP p 462.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Buchanan, *Cut the Connection*, p 68.

<sup>58</sup> RP p 467.

treating citizens without fear or favour not on the grounds of their religious beliefs or lack of them but of their common humanity. This understanding of the secular state accords with and in part grew from the Dissenting tradition and is implied in the call for religious liberty. It is not the 'secularist' state, which is merely another form of the religious state with its own absolute commitments, nor is it the 'pagan' state in which the state becomes its own deity.

To claim that the state should be religiously neutral, as I am claiming, needs some exposition. People rightly talk about the 'myth of religious neutrality', meaning that any position taken up concerning moral values must reflect some kind of conviction concerning the nature of reality. At the heart of every position there are those things upon which everything else depends and which themselves depend on nothing. I am not seeking to describe a morally neutral state but one in which the *value of impartiality* is deeply rooted. It is a biblical value and a repeated theme in both OT and NT (Deut. 1: 17; 16: 19; Prov. 24:23; 28:21; Acts 10:34). Only in this way can a religiously diverse society be held together. The question to be posed by the fact of establishment is whether the bestowal of privilege on any one confessional tradition is a breach of this impartiality.

The state is one aspect of society. It grows out of and reinforces the values that are commonly held. Elaine Storkey is right to argue that a few minor arrangements with government make little or no impact upon secularisation since that process belongs to society as a whole. As Storkey claims:

The way to address secularisation is not to cling to the Prime Minister's role in appointing bishops or to Parliament's ratification of Christian doctrine. It is, as the Archbishop [of Canterbury<sup>59</sup>] has already suggested, to preach the Gospel, to tell the story of Christ, to love human beings.<sup>60</sup>

This leads us to the nature of Christian mission.

### *Christian mission*

It is overwhelmingly clear from the debate that at stake, and in part accounting for the passion which underlay it, are two contrasting understandings of mission to society and to nation. Here is the root of the concern that bishops should continue to be national figures. One admires those, such as the Dean of Wells,<sup>61</sup> who wish establishment to be a vehicle for national witness, even while suspecting the proprietorial assumptions underlying this approach. The current arrangements are, for the Revd Peter Townley, a sign of God's love for the world.<sup>62</sup> At this point even the Archbishop of York comes in for criticism. His picture of the present arrangements working quite well, despite a few hiccups, and of a fruitful partnership between Church and

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59 RP p 448.

60 RP p 462.

61 RP p 455.

62 RP p 318.

State, is portrayed by Canon Bob Baker as 'a kind of cosy, comfortable, walking-along-together fellowship relationship between the Church and the State'<sup>63</sup> and by Canon John Sentamu as a 'spirit of complacency'. Sentamu advances the view that the Church needs to ask how well it is *using* establishment.<sup>64</sup>

By contrast Buchanan makes it absolutely clear that his concern in bringing the motion was not for a purist, sectarian disengagement from society:

I believe deep down that we are doing something missionary in disentangling ourselves from these particular features of State control, and the actual engagement in North Staffordshire [responding at this point to the Bishop of Stafford<sup>65</sup>] or wherever else would continue, it seems to me, totally unaffected but with clearer ideas about what we are doing.<sup>66</sup>

Here I raise the question which most of the debate failed to address. How can a church which itself is the recipient of royal and governmental privilege be an agent for the challenging of privilege in other areas of society? If its role is both to proclaim the gospel and to be an exemplary community, how does clinging to privileges denied to others serve the mission?

Two participants echoed this point. Ian Smith of York asserted: 'Surely the Gospel is not about privilege' and argued that the church should be in identification with the poor, not with the privileged.<sup>67</sup> Dr Anna Thomas-Betts of Oxford, speaking as a self-confessed ecumenist, portrayed the language concerning the uniqueness of the Church of England's service to the nation as 'arrogance and élitism'.<sup>68</sup> The issue of privilege is posed for me by the ambiguity involved in having twenty-six bishops in the House of Lords. This fact emerged repeatedly<sup>69</sup> as one of the significant gains of establishment, allowing a voice in the counsels of power and an effective one in that it renders a direct influence upon legislation possible. Yet this is surely a most ambiguous gain. The House of Lords is the greatest bastion of privilege in our national life and a constitutional anomaly in a modern democracy. Its hereditary peers have the right by birth to sit as Members of Parliament. This right, to inherit by birth a position in Parliament and the power to affect legislation or even to serve in the government without either having been elected or been made a life peer on intrinsic merit, is denied all other citizens and stands as a fundamental inequality, a distinct partiality towards the 'high' against the 'low'. A truer Christian witness would, I suggest, be in line with the historic desire of Dissent to abolish or radically to reform the House of Lords.

63 RP p 321.

64 RP p 456.

65 RP pp 458f.

66 RP p 467.

67 RP p 322.

68 RP p 466.

69 RP pp 326, 446, 447.

It is not enough to claim that the Lords is 'just there' and needs to be made use of. Voices from the bishops' bench calling for its radical reform are noticeably absent. If the Lords were reformed it could not reproduce the present privileged position of the Church of England. Paradoxically, then, the greatest specific advantage of establishment reveals its weakness, complicity in the system of inherited privilege. To this extent, the church's mission as an exemplary community is compromised and the Church of England's right and duty to be critical of privilege undermined.

To this observer the debate in the Synod was an example of this blind spot. Interpreting the debate by means of the hermeneutic of suspicion suggests that many were and are seeking to maintain the privileged position of the Church and managing to persuade themselves that it is for the good of the nation to maintain the present arrangements. Jesus observed to his disciples that, 'the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority call themselves benefactors. But not so with you'. (Luke 22: 25) The fundamental reality is the possession of power, but the rhetoric which legitimates it is that of benefaction; disciples are called to be different. One suspects that the energy behind the opposition to Buchanan's motion was derived in part from the fear of the further loss of social significance and not from a true theology of mission.

### Conclusions

I approach this issue as a church member and as a citizen. My concluding remarks reflect these two perspectives.

As a member of the Dissenting tradition there can for me be no compromise of the freedom of the church for self-government. There would be no objection in principle to consulting political leaders, if such channels were open, to gain their perspectives on candidates for national roles of Christian leadership. But to yield the final decision to such persons would be unacceptable. If that prerogative were claimed by government for any church other than the Church of England, we should imagine ourselves to be living in a totalitarian state. That it can be tolerated in the case of the Church of England is surely only the result of custom, not of its inherent rightness. From time to time it is claimed, as for instance by the Archbishop of York,<sup>70</sup> that for the most part members of other Christian churches do not favour disestablishment. Free Church hesitation on this subject is therefore used to bolster an arrangement which nearly all other Christian traditions would reject. It needs to be made clear that other churches would welcome further moves towards disestablishment and even disestablishment itself for the sake of the theological integrity of Christ's church.

The Church of Scotland is an example of how a church can be recognised as a national church without the drawbacks of establishment. Granted that there are different ways in which the word 'national' might here be under-

70 As in his letter to *The Times*, 30 January 1993.

stood (and Buchanan detects eight possibilities<sup>71</sup>), a church which has spread into all parts of the nation, or is found in all parts of its life or is rooted in the nation's past, need not be dependent upon establishment for this role. It is a matter of fact. The Church of Scotland effectively became the Church by law disestablished in 1921 when it was freed by state action and state control was lifted.<sup>72</sup> It cannot be denied that the Church of England holds a particular place in the history of the nation, being the heir of the pre-Reformation Church which preceded virtually every other national institution. I do find a conflict however with the idea that such a body should be given privileges denied to others. Nothing short of an extensive reform of the present arrangements would be adequate to rectify this. Those proposed by Bishop Buchanan, but rejected on this occasion by Synod, are small but necessary steps in this direction.

As a citizen, and one whose political inclinations are shaped by his religious beliefs and commitments, I am resolutely opposed to inequality and privilege in affairs of state. In the public life funded from taxation of all a nation's citizens there should be equality of opportunity for all without regard to race, gender, or religious conviction. Merit should be recognised wherever it comes from. Establishment is therefore inadequate not only on religious but also on political grounds. Yet to argue this is not to argue that religion and politics should function without regard to each other. Governments should be open to consult the broad spectrum of opinions. States develop out of societies and the well-being of societies (and therefore of states) is dependent upon the virtues and morality of the population at large. Religious communities play a large role in forming and shaping the character of the civil population and their role should be acknowledged and respected. Religious communities should represent their convictions through participation in the democratic process and through the wider means of debate and persuasion which an open society affords.

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71 Buchanan, *Cut the Connection*, pp 3f.

72 Ibid., pp 2f.