

Editorial

The state and episcopal appointments

The reported reversal by the Prime Minister of the order of names for the new Bishop of London, presented to her by the Crown Appointments Commission, has produced a predictable and understandable demand for a change in the method of appointment, and has raised again the question of whether the fact of establishment places undue constraints on the Church of England. In reality, of course, the state has already surrendered most of the rights it once enjoyed in this area. The Prime Minister's choice is 'exercised within a field which the church itself (has) formed and delimited' (General Synod, Standing Committee, *Crown Appointments*, GS 304, CIO, London 1976, p.8). Under the prevailing system this involves the right to alter the preference of the two names which have been submitted, if a preference has been stated; or, in the highly improbable event of both names being rejected, to refer the whole matter back to the Commission. It involves, in other words, a small and largely symbolic surrender of the church's sovereignty over its own affairs, and reaction to this is likely to be governed according to whether establishment is regarded as right in itself, or, at any rate, appropriate in the prevailing climate in England in 1981.

There are numerous degrees of establishment. Recognition by the state that a church is the national church of a country, gives it at once a special position. As a result, it may be given a privileged position in law; its institutions may be protected; its personnel and plant may be financed; and it may, in return, be expected to demonstrate loyalty, to carry out certain civil duties, and to surrender some independence in its appointments. Few or none of these things may happen formally and yet a church may be, as the Roman Catholic Church is in Ireland, to all intents and purposes effectively the established church, though it is not by law established. It is interesting that in France, where church and state are formally separated, the state has an influential voice in all major episcopal appointments. The problems arise either when the influence of the state becomes intrusive and inhibiting to the carrying out of the spiritual and prophetic roles of the church, or when the particular form in which the relationship is expressed becomes historically anachronistic: that is, it no longer represents the prevailing reality.

It is extremely difficult to argue with conviction that the state in England is intrusive or inhibiting to the spiritual and prophetic role of the Church of England. Partly because the relationship was embarrassing to the state in a religiously pluralistic country, and partly

because the Church of England has become more determined to develop institutions which allow it to control its own destiny, the state's power is much more limited than it was even a decade ago. The Worship and Doctrine Measure, and the new procedures for appointing bishops, were both carried through in the seventies. Clearly the residual power within Parliament and in the hands of the Crown must be monitored at all times, but the contention that the method of appointment of the Bishop of London illustrates its unacceptable face, carries no conviction. If it illustrates anything, it is the rather limited influence the Church of England gives to a diocese in the choice of its bishop. Mrs Thatcher, in fact, chose the candidate of the vacancy-in-see committee, and what is a matter of concern here is not so much that she rejected what appears to have been the somewhat indecisive advice of the Commission on Crown Appointments, but that it is set up in such a way that representatives from the diocese do not have a more significant voice.

It is not difficult, in the context of the evident secularization and religious pluralism of our society, to argue the anachronism of any form of religious establishment. Yet there remains a very substantial majority who regard themselves as 'C of E'. Whether the Church of England is still close enough to the nation's sense of national identity to be able to use the residue of its once privileged position as an instrument of recreation and conversion, or whether ministering the *rites de passage*—to an allegiance which is no more than the ghostly promptings of a weak folk-religion—stretches its resources in a way that is counter-productive to mission and ministry, is surely the key question. In answering it, the Prime Minister's role in the appointment of bishops is an engaging irrelevance.

The state and the prayer book

The Prayer Book (Protection) Bill, which stipulates that the agreement of twenty people on a church electoral roll would ensure the use of the *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)* at a main service at least once a month, is an interesting example of the special relationship with the state providing a forum outside the church to make a point about its internal ordering. In 1978 one of the sponsors of the present bill, Lord Sudeley, introduced another bill which would have required a ballot to be held in any parish which proposed to use one of the alternative services. The bill was not proceeded with, as the Standing Committee of General Synod point out, 'because it was recognized that for Parliament to initiate legislation on a Church of England matter would breach the convention which had subsisted ever since the passing of the Enabling Act, 1919 that the legislative initiative lies with the church, and that it is then for Parliament simply to accept or reject the church's proposals' (General Synod, Standing Committee,

Church and State: Lord March's Motion, GS 400, CIO, London 1979, p.6.). If the more recent bill, or any other bill, was advanced in such a way as to breach the convention, then clearly the most intolerable situation would be created. Disestablishment would be required. No such threat appears to be contemplated and the bill together with the degree of support it mobilized, rather illustrates the positive and helpful aspect of the relationship. It reveals the deep affection that exists, outside as well as inside the church, for the unique spiritual and cultural heritage which the *BCP* represents.

It behoves those who determine the worship patterns of churches to be very aware of this. The past decade and a half have seen the creation of a liturgy which is more intelligible and meaningful to the majority of people, and allows a variety which is spiritually helpful. It is an achievement of great importance. The groundswell of unease, however, indicates serious reservations on the part of many intelligent laity. This should not be dismissed as the nostalgia of those who regard the Church of England affectionately as a precious period piece. The arguments make sense. Worship does need more than intelligibility: it needs a sense of the beyond, even to 'the most casual passer-by', 'the hint of glory' (David Martin, 'Why Spit on Our Luck?', *PN Review* 13, 1979, p.3). Liturgical language, like the biblical text, is enormously enhanced by being rich and memorable so that it 'provides the furniture of the mind and etches itself on the soul' (*ibid.*, p.2). There is a need to forge links with the past; to be made aware of continuities across the ages. It is not necessary to exaggerate the contribution of the *BCP*, or to denigrate the style of the *Alternative Service Book*, to be convinced that the *BCP* is a unique heritage which needs to be guarded actively from desuetude. Parliament may have done the church a considerable service by reminding it of the richness of its liturgical inheritance, and by suggesting the importance of responsible planning to preserve its benefits.

The state and the Unification Church

The exceeding hostile reaction to the Moonies, in the wake of the recent libel trial, indicates how important public opinion can be even to the most marginal religious groups. In the last analysis such groups can only operate openly, with the privileges which have been historically the right of religious bodies, if there is a measure of public tolerance for them. As far as the Moonies are concerned, the state is being pressed, sometimes by well-intentioned Christians, to remove their tax privileges through the Charity Commissioners and to examine their activities with a view perhaps to curtailing their rights to operate as a religious group.

Orthodox Christians can have little sympathy with the strange

amalgam of beliefs which characterize the Moonies; even less with some of their methods of evangelization and instruction, or with the use to which their vast resources are put. Equally clearly, the state should not be pressed to take punitive action against them simply because their views are deemed to be false. Only if their methods are considered to be very seriously disruptive and dangerous should such a course be sanctioned. The criterion which is suggested, that of 'the public good', is far from simple. If tests such as 'the breaking of family ties' and 'the exercise of undue psychological pressure' (cf. article in *The Times*, 10 April 1981, p.16) are applied, they could be used by the state in a way which would threaten religious freedom. The role of the state in the twentieth century, as far as religions are concerned, must surely be to guarantee freedom rather than to impose restrictions, and to ensure fairness of treatment rather than to demonstrate favouritism. At the same time, it must be realized that such freedom cannot be open-ended: it must operate within the law, and it must respect the human rights of others. In the last resort, it may be necessary to prohibit, for example, certain forms of psychological coercion and pressure, but, before urging this, Christians need to be absolutely certain that such coercion seriously inhibits the liberty of the individual and is without his free consent. To invite an increasingly secular state to inhibit religious freedom, is a course which should only be taken when the evidence of danger is pressing and irrefutable. What is pressing and irrefutable is the knowledge that some secular states inhibit religious freedom in a highly unsatisfactory way, because it acts against 'the public good'. Russia remains a cautionary model for England, and the West.

The state and Roman Catholicism in Northern Ireland

If the church must be constantly on its guard lest it succumb to the political blandishments of a state anxious to use it for its own secular ends, it must equally be aware of giving succour to those who violently oppose the state, unless that state has forfeited all credible claims to the rightful exercise of authority. The Roman Catholic Church in Northern Ireland is manifestly at the sharp end as far as its attitude to the state is concerned. On the one hand, it does not give theological justification to revolution against the present authority; on the other, it does appear to allow itself to be influenced by the nationalistic cultural and social *mores* of its majority, so that its attitudes are sometimes governed more by political expediency than theological reasoning. This is very apparent in its reaction to hunger-striking. An unequivocal denunciation of this practice, accompanied by a declaration that resulting death would be regarded as suicide, could have reduced its support immeasurably, and perhaps ended the action. Instead, it has refused to speak in such terms. What is more

alarming is that the Roman Catholic Curia has also failed to pronounce in such explicit language.

It is of much more than historical interest that, in the famous Irish hunger-strike of Terence MacSwiney in 1921, the Curia resisted considerable pressure to pronounce death by hunger-striking to be an act of suicide because, in the judgement of the historian Dr Miller, of the opposition of the Irish Church in Rome. The attitude of Irish Catholicism illustrates, he contends, 'the subordination of theological discussion to political considerations in the minds and actions of the hierarchy' (David W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland, 1898-1921*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1973, p.462).

Christianity is concerned with the surmounting of cultural, national and social barriers. The universality of the institutions of Roman Catholicism should act as a brake on the natural instincts towards particularity. That this has been achieved to such a limited degree in Ireland not only increases the bloodshed in these islands, but also brings reasonable moral condemnation of that church, and therefore of Christianity, from men of goodwill. This should be a matter of concern to Anglicans because of their ecumenical links with Roman Catholics and because of their profound sympathy with all those—many of them fellow-Anglicans—who suffer in the tragedy of Northern Ireland.

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