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Is There A Case For A National Church?

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There has been, during recent years, considerable discussion in this country about a conflict of Church and State. What was meant, of course, was a conflict between the leadership of the National Church—the Church of England—and the governing Conservative Party. Experience of this type of disagreement has many parallels in other countries, countries which no longer have national establishments of religion but in which conservative elements of opinion have found themselves out of sympathy with what seemed to them to be the drift of Christianity towards the social politics of the Left. To the extent that this drift, or re-orientation, indicated a central secularization of the perceived content of Christianity it was indeed serious; yet most of what occurred was a more surface matter: it was ordinary political disagreement. What there has not been in this country in recent years is any significant discussion about the theoretical and ideological basis of a relationship of Church and State, of Christian opinion and public policy in a structured form. Is there any longer a practical or philosophical foundation for a National Church?

The implications of liberal democracy are an immediate difficulty which few, surprisingly, find difficult. In traditional society the State could embrace religious opinion and give it the protection of law because the State was conceived as having a conscience. The authorities who conducted the agencies of government chose a religious basis because they deemed it to be true: the sovereign represented a worldly order which was providentially designed to preserve social peace and to secure the conditions in which morality could flourish; the ecclesiastical hierarchy, for its part, taught Christianity to the subjects. Popular sanction did not come into these arrangements, and there was not even any need for the version of Christianity given official recognition to be that of the majority. The Protestant State Church was maintained in Ireland, for example, for three centuries before it was disestablished; and there the Roman Catholics were always in an enormous majority. The modern democratization of the instruments of government has made a fundamental change which the leaders of both Church and State seem scarcely to have noticed. Government now rests on popular assent, and there is a widespread conviction that the people is sovereign. The survival of monarchy, like the continued existence of a State Church, is a kind of benign anomaly: for it is the sovereignty of opinion, tested at periodical elections on the basis of universal suffrage, which in

reality provides the sanction of association. Is it possible to have an establishment of religion on the foundation of popular sovereignty? Can truth be determined by the counting of heads?

To the last question, presumably, few would answer 'Yes'. Truth, and especially religious truth, hardly derives from mass opinion. Indeed one of the most certain things about religion is that those most in need of it are the least likely to realize the fact. The Gospels are full of hints that those who take up the Cross will be a small number. People who really believe in their values are unlikely to leave their survival to the hazard of popular opinion. And in practice this hardly happens because of two features of contemporary liberal democracy. The first is that public opinion is not autonomous—educated élites set up the agenda and the terms of reference and even, in general, provide the personnel, for operating a system in which the choices put to the electorate are predisposed to exclude unacceptable options. The second is the reservation of areas of belief and moral choice which government is supposed to leave to individual selection. Modern governments have shown a willingness to concede that the state ought not to 'interfere' in the processes by which the citizens derive their values. It is a peculiar feature of British government that it carries this practice so far that the State has no means of speaking directly to the citizens—it relies on an independent media for this, and the notion of a state-sponsored press or television (as exists in most countries in the world) is here regarded as fearfully sinister. There exists a kind of consensus among the opinion-makers, however, that promotion of the prevailing sacral values may be extended into law. Thus ideals favouring, for example, social justice—issues like race-relations, or sexual parity in employment—may be enforced by the State. But questions which the opinion-makers chance to find controversial, like religious belief, are left to individual selection. The recent debate on the religious education clauses of the Education Reform Act brought some of this near to the surface: not too near, as it happened, because everyone was anxious that the 'Christianity' to be promoted in the schools was a cultural rather than a confessional expression, that it was to be seen as an affair of ethics rather than of actual religious doctrines.

In very many areas, however, the modern state continues to extend its systems of regulatory control—in response to an eager public opinion which clamours for the use of law to cure all human ills. Every disaster, every media revelation of social dislocation, results in demands for more legislative action; and so does every impulse of social justice. It is one of the most salient features of the disagreements between the Church of England's leadership and the Conservative government that the former insists on collectivist solutions to social ills. The powers of the state continue to stack up for such benevolent purposes that the public fails to recognize how

inherently dangerous it could all turn out to be. For there is no agreement in modern society about the moral basis; there is no uncontroversial system of reference for values as once there was—Christianity—which guides the state in the acquisition of its powers. People employ the rhetoric of Human Rights ideology as a substitute, evidently innocently unaware that, like all Natural Law formulations, it is all general and without specific agreed content. Forms of words are apparently shared, yet enormously differing systems are sustained by them: witness the vast gulf of interpretation about Human Rights between east and west in the Helsinki Accords. Now the potential danger here is that the State's acquisition of its collectivist power is occurring where there is no agreed moral foundation, and what looks laudable today may indeed appear extremely sinister in a few decades, when a clear and consistent moral code may have been adopted by the State in response to popular adhesion to some philosophy of politics. A totalitarian future could well emerge from today's good intentions. The Church's part in sponsoring the call for collectivist solutions to social evils, as in the *Faith in the City* report, is a contemporary expression of one of the ways in which it understands its utility as a National Church. It is to be the conscience of society. But where this operates in alliance with moral incoherence—the moral incoherence of existing social pluralism—it actually seems to be behaving less like a National establishment of religion and more like an ordinary pressure-group.

The notion of social pluralism has been much discussed in recent years, and has been broadly espoused by the Churches themselves as a positive enrichment to society. They refer mostly to ethnic pluralism. But the *value* pluralism of contemporary society is of much greater significance in the present context. Differences of life-style and religion based on ethnic realities are still extremely small in British society, and whatever the proper demands of justice in protecting minority rights they are still, in themselves, very far removed from dislodging a National Establishment of religion. Value pluralism within the educated classes is another matter, however. That has extremely serious implications. It is often said, especially by conservatives, that very large social value orthodoxies persist in society. But even if that is the case, and it probably is so, it scarcely assists determination of the right course for the State. Widely-held opinions, in our understanding of democratic polity, do not have to receive legal enactment. There has been no concession to the large public clamour for capital punishment. The prevailing theory of government (though rather incoherent) assumes that it is the duty of public men to lead opinion and not to follow it. So we are back with the opinion-makers once more—with the educated élites who actually determine the agenda for the *demos*. And among them there is certainly a very evident value pluralism. It is because of their

differing ideas that the modern collectivist state may be said to have no agreed moral basis. Nor are they to be ticked off and told to arrive at a moral coherence. It is probably one of the greatest advances of modern liberation that thinking and reflecting people have recognized their internal diversities and have sought ways of reserving public space for diversity to be maintained. The implication, as in classic nineteenth-century liberal thought, is a diminished rôle for the State, in order to allow individual opinion freedom of expression. In practice, however, the powers of the state continue to expand at the same time as public opinion-makers acclaim the need to preserve diversity of values. How does the notion of a National Church fit in to this situation of incoherence? Almost no one has cared to frame the question in this way. It was once contended—as by Coleridge, and for a time by the young Gladstone—that the state had a conscience which was capable of identifying and acting for the inherent spiritual sense of society. But even if there was an inherent spiritual sense then (which was unlikely) there certainly is not one now. The English people, in particular, are astonishingly ignorant of the main tenets of Christianity, which they popularly identify as a kind of benevolent ethicism. There is no discernible 'folk soul', residual pool of spirituality, or (the last thing to have gone) Biblical knowledge. There is, in fact, no national disposition for authentic religion which a National Church can represent. The persistent widespread adoption of the term 'Christian' which Englishmen make is little more than a vague equation with ordinary decency. The absence of an authentic popular base, and the genuine value diversity of the intelligentsia, taken together with the moral incoherence of government, do not make promising foundations for a National Church.

Yet all law implies a prior system of values, and you cannot organize society without structural values. We survive today by chance: when, inevitably, issues of real ideological and diversive significance come along the appearance of value neutrality will vanish. Similarly, in a classroom you cannot leave children 'to think for themselves' when it comes to values. However well-intentioned may be the pretence of allowing them to discover and to choose for themselves children are in reality carefully guided into approved attitudes—like the slave Meno in the Socratic dialogue. There are always orthodox values and they are enforced. Why should Christianity stand aside and allow rival ideologies an open field for the imposition of their values? The answer is that today most of those alien ideologies (variants of Humanism) are usually identified by Christian thinkers as differing aspects of Christian moral insight. One of the bases of a National Church—that it is the guardian of morality—is therefore no longer available to Christianity in this country. The churches appear ready to acquiesce in the moral claims made by their philosophical rivals. This will seem a very contentious conclusion to

some; they will argue that the secular Humanism of prevailing opinion is in reality the surviving deposit of centuries of Christianity.

Here, then, are some very real difficulties about the logical existence of a National Church in a polity like ours. Democratic practice implies that a national profession of Christianity rests upon the majority principle, which can hardly be right since truth is not authenticated by the counting of heads. Value pluralism is a real if restricted phenomenon, but it characterizes the very people who set up the terms of reference upon which society and government operate. Government, for all the rhetorical exchanges of public men has no agreed moral foundations. In practice modern governments do not consult the existing State Church, or any other religious agencies, when legislating on issues which are conventionally received as moral issues. The secularization of social and moral values—which has been an uneven and long-established feature of English life—has not proceeded upon ideological lines. It is a matter of scarcely-conscious orientation and disposition which, like the moral foundations of the State, is largely left incoherent and inconclusive. These are not the conditions which particularly help either society or government to have a formal legal relationship with religious confessionalism. The practice of Erastianism, which was so exactly fixed in the English Reformation, simply faded away in the light of nineteenth-century changes in the constitutional structure, which opened up political life and destroyed the situation in which parliament was a proper administrator of the Church because it was an assembly of its laity. No matter how carefully and judiciously ecclesiastical autonomy may now operate, through the relative and practical separation of Church and State that has taken place, the fact remains that the modern State has none of the qualities which qualify it for entry into a relationship with an institution which identifies itself as an earthly embodiment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

What of that institution, in its English context? If the modern State is ill-suited to be a party to a Church and State union, the Church of England seems scarcely less so. Its immediate difficulty, from this point of perspective, is that it does not have an adequate Doctrine of the Church itself. How is it to determine or authenticate its doctrinal basis? Centuries of Erastian practice disguised the problem because effective parliamentary control, and the English disposition not to entrust religion to the clergy—a popular prejudice which went well with Erastianism—either left difficult issues unresolved or, and this was more usual, failed to see there were any difficulties that needed resolution. Now the decay of Erastianism, the attrition of practical secularization, and the radical urgency of adjusting timeless Christian truths to the intellectual moulds of a society which is undergoing an explosion of knowledge, have led to a situation in which the English National Church really does need some kind of authoritative means

of expressing its doctrines. The Synodical structure, which began in 1970, is largely declaratory and disciplinary. The Synods do not have the power (and evidently not the capacity) to determine doctrine. Many within the Church of England like to see it as a part of the 'historical' Church—as Catholic, as a local representation of a universal institution. But of what universal body is it the local agent? Doctrine may only be determined by General Councils of the Church, but the English National Church has neither the means of calling a Council nor the right to attend one called by the Catholic Church. Even in matters of discipline, like the ordination of women, its authority is unclear, as the international chaos in the Anglican Communion over this relatively uncomplicated issue has made very plain. Despite brave talk about 'diversity within unity', which is largely devoid of real content, and frank sophistry about 'devolved authority', and so forth, the English National Church is actually left with virtually no agreed internal means of authenticating its own existence. What was brushed aside at the Reformation has now returned to haunt the present: Anglicanism does not really have a Doctrine of the Church at all. How then can it determine a local relationship to the modern state, if the existing anomaly is to be replaced?

There is a sense in which these kinds of considerations are all rather theoretical. In practice the English people are not unhappy with the idea of a National Church—provided it does not actually interfere with their lives or their beliefs. The theological imprecision of Anglicanism is well-suited to the English people, who cheerfully equate religion with virtually any sort of elevating sentiment, and whose distrust of precise truth has a long pedigree. The English clergy are socially active, and that, too, hits a sympathetic resonance: the English do not like the Church to 'meddle in politics', but are on the other hand extremely scornful of clergy who are 'so spiritually minded that they are no earthly use.' The contemporary clergy are moralists, and they make up for their vagueness about personal moral conduct with a generous supply of social morality. That, too, shares some qualities with the English public, who are disappointed if public figures do not give a prominent moral tone to their social and economic observations. Until very recently the Church was also familiar through the familiarity of the Bible—whose traditionalist language and whose timeless images were an important dimension of popular culture. That, now, has gone. But nothing has really replaced it, and certainly nothing that is overtly or potentially antipathetic to religion. The State Church furnishes a fancy-dress presence on national occasions which, like a bride in traditional white, elicits a certain satisfaction in the body of the people. The serious point, however, is that the existence of the National Church enables public life to rumble on without anyone having to define what

the moral and value basis of society actually is. In that sense it is a characteristic prop to the English addiction to ideological idleness—which the men in charge of things identify as the pragmatic tradition of English public life. It may be that it is precisely this domesticating of Christianity (so becoming a useful rite of passage or a harmless symbol of national identity) which does most damage to Christianity as a religion. It is all of a piece with the privatization of religion that has been gradually advancing during the last two centuries, and which is now so complete as to have become one of the sacred values of contemporary society. Even the most distinguished of clerics, especially when referring to other religions and their practitioners, now speak of religious faith as a matter of sovereign individual choice. The notion that a man's religion has implications for social shape and social authority are now so far removed from modern consciousness that it is hard for modern observers to conceive what it was like in traditional society, when religion always involved group identity.

National Churches and cultural self-consciousness, especially in relation to political culture, go together. The Church is the guardian of the moral basis of the State; the State, for its part, protects the institutions of religion and promotes their beliefs. In what sense can the modern English state be said to promote Christianity? There are plenty of people who will say that it does, especially politicians seeking ultimate sanction for their pretensions. There are many who, in view of the value-pluralism of society, say that it should not. And many of these last are good Christians who recognize that where there is a culture of moral and spiritual diversity all belief-systems are protected by allowing the state to sponsor none. It is a laudable position, but in practice the State *does* have to adopt a value-system: young citizens in the process of being socialized have to be told something about the normative foundations and the moral imperatives. In practice, of course, they are offered a nameless secular Humanism. Sometimes this is overlaid with a covering of Christian symbolism and is passed off as evidence of surviving national Christian identity. As an alternative to the contrivance of a secular state, which many would find distasteful, (although a benign example is to hand in the Constitution of the United States), it has sometimes been suggested that the National Church should be so broadened as to include the widest manageable range of religious opinion. Thus the House of Lords is to contain Life Peers drawn from the teachers and officials of the various religious faiths represented in the country, and the provision of religious education in the State's schools is to be either broadened or shared between the faiths—both of which devices are already, anyway, widely practised. Notions of a National Church sufficiently broad to incorporate diversity of opinion go back to Thomas Arnold and the 1830s, and have a certain appeal to the

liberal temper. But in reality, if explored with vigour, they will be found to create as many anomalies as they replace—perhaps to create even more—and the formula arrived at by most nations in the world is probably more reliable. This is the secular state, operating, in the western liberal understanding of things, within a society of value-pluralism. It is then left to the citizens to derive their own religious beliefs and practice, and the duty of the state is to protect each from interference (in all things lawful) by others. In the end no one ever agrees about the lines of demarcation that have to be drawn in such a polity—as, for example, between a 'private' religious concern and the public good. But secular states whose political cultures are founded upon liberal values do not have a bad track-record in modern times at allowing reasonable freedoms to their citizens. Secular states which overtly promote secularized values, as in some of the Socialist republics, are plainly hazardous to the survival of religion. It is an open question whether the nameless Humanism of western liberal systems may not have comparable effects in time.

In the end it is probably less the system than the ultimate beliefs of the people who run it that determine the outcome. Non-liberal states which promoted Christianity—as in the Byzantine Empire—did so through a species of totalitarianism. People had only the most formal freedom to choose Christianity: the whole arrangement of the social and political structure chose it for them. Most religious belief, in most cultures, has been like that. No one of any discernment is going to suggest that a National Church appropriate to modern circumstances would have much in common with such an arrangement. But is a secular polity, which actually promotes an ill-defined moral position while pretending it does not, or by lauding it up with large and largely meaningless Human Rights rhetoric, much better? Should the present anomalies be allowed to proceed upon their inconsequential way? No position seems satisfactory. Perhaps the world of politics should first clarify the bases of its moral authority, and the world of religion re-discover its doctrinal authority. You can only re-arrange the furniture when you can see the shape of the room.

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