Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Summer 2006 No. 101

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

IS BRITAIN A SECULAR STATE?

David Phillips

If being a secular state means keeping religion out of public life and out of education then quite clearly Britain is not a secular state.

The Church of England, which can be dated in many respects from the 7th Century, predates the nation of England itself. In its early years the Church provided a degree of unity between the seven kingdoms of the Angles and Saxons that then existed and which were not united politically for a century or more. Since the founding of the English nation it has seen itself as a Christian nation, its monarchs have affirmed allegiance to Christ (though the genuineness and character of their faith can be doubted). It is still the case that the monarchy is a Christian monarchy. The Queen at her coronation was asked "Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law?" to which she replied "All this I promise and do." It makes no sense to say that we are a secular state when its head of state has sworn to do such a thing. Moreover, if the next monarch breaks this allegiance to Christ, as he seems willing to do, he will break what the monarchy has been since the inception of the English nation. We remember too that the Queen was crowned by the Archbishop – if we became a secular state but retained a monarch presumably the monarch would be crowned by the Prime Minister – or perhaps by the winner of a national competition.

Though the influence of the Christian faith in formal ways in national life is less than it was it is still very evident. The presence of the Lord's spiritual in the house (however ineffective some may feel them to be), prayers before parliament, the fact of an established church including senior appointments, church legislation passed by parliament, senior appointments and the exercise of patronage by the Crown and Lord Chancellor all show that religion is still entwined in our national life Also, there have been the various royal weddings and funerals. Whatever a person may make of these things they all demonstrate that religion, the Christian religion, is very much part of our national life.

(I note that recently former Archbishop George Carey has been reported as arguing that the coronation service and oath should be revised to be more multi-cultural. When last reported present Archbishop Rowan Williams said that without revising the constitutional position of the monarchy the next monarch would have to affirm allegiance to the Christian faith.)

Much of what has been highlighted above can be seen also at the local level. Secularism is not simply about removing religion from national life, but about removing it from public life. We know that there are many pressure points in this respect too but it remains the case that many Anglican churches still hold many civic services and in some places are actively engaged in local life. (Some recent discussions have revealed that one of the chief criteria in choosing Bishops now appears to be that they have had an active engagement in civic affairs. This reflects the view of many involved in the selection process that the Bishop does and should play a key role in representing the Church in public affairs. There are certainly flaws in this but it intrigues me that Bishops often see themselves and are encouraged to fight secularism in this way.)

The other sphere where the religious-secular divide materializes itself is in education. We covered this in the last but one issue of Cross†Way but it is worth repeating some of the statistics. A quarter of all primary schools are Church of England schools. The great majority of public schools are

Christian foundations. Further, although there are far fewer church secondary schools there are still many and many others have Christian foundations. Even the schools attended by my two children, which make no open pretense of being Christian schools, have the Vicar as an ex-officio Governor and an annual service in the parish church which is required by their founding documents. As reported previously education is a great battle ground between religion and secularism. More recently the annual conference of the National Union of Teachers was asked to approve a motion calling for an end to faith schools – but the motion was rejected.

Finally, there are the statistics, which bear repeating. Whatever we may make of them it is the case that at the last Census 72% of people called themselves Christian. That is nearly three-quarters of the population. Lilkewise in a MORI poll released in January less than half the population believed in secular-evolution (life evolved and God had no part – which could include deists). Such statistics prove nothing in themselves, it is possible in principle to have a nation in which all the population are of one religion but the state is secular. In the United States where a higher proportion not only claim to be Christian but are active churchgoers there is likewise a debate ongoing about whether the state is secular or not. Nevertheless, because the Christian faith is still entwined in national life in the UK the statistics are very relevant.

What the United States also demonstrates is that the effect of religion on national life is not simply one of formal engagement. The laws and customs of nations do not derive in a vacuum because the law makers are people themselves and therefore usually reflect the values of those around them. When the people of a nation have been so shaped by a particular religion the values of that religion will generally be reflected in the national life. In places like the US and indeed in France, the influence of Christianity has been felt despite the varying degrees of separation of Church and state. But to a large extent this is changing. What we are seeing increasingly in the western nations is an open abandonment of Christian ethics. Christians will wish in this context to seek to influence the life of the nation and those around them. This seems to be largely accepted in Britain because of the nature of the Church to the state, though we are generally poor at bringing real influence. In the US, where Christians are numerically stronger, and apparently more militant, the resistance to their views is not on particular issues but on the very idea of Christians influencing national life with the secularists arguing that it is unconstitutional.

Towards the end of last year Archbishop Rowan Williams gave an interesting lecture in Lyon on the relationship of religion to the European super-state. He quoted the 19th Century political theorist Lord Acton who apparently maintained that "the separation of Church and state was the foundation of all political liberty". Many would seem to agree with Acton, and no doubt it appealed to the French. Yet we would have to maintain against this that Britain has not done badly in facilitating political liberty despite being, as we have shown, a Christian state with an established Church. Williams claimed that this was not what Acton meant but rather that he was arguing that we should beware of governments who claim religious authority or divine sanction for their actions. This is an important note because it is what many people fear in the idea of a religious state, they think it will permit injustice and evil with a divine seal of approval. We have to admit that historically this has clearly happened at times. Such fear also appears to lie behind the response of some people to George Bush; to them his religious convictions seem somehow to be a threat to liberty. Even Tony Blair, whose faith is at best well hidden, has been accused at times as being driven by religious fanaticism and the same has happened with other ministers. The danger is that we are allowing secularists to create an environment in which anyone with clear religious convictions may be ruled out of political leadership.

Rowan Williams' suggestion for Europe, incidentally, is that the Church should be alongside the state in order that it might act as a guardian, able to offer criticism. This is not unreasonable and does to some extent echo the role of the prophets in the Old Testament who sought to call the Kings

to account. However, we should not forget that in the Old Testament the prophets did not just speak against the kings, they also rebuked the people, and in particular the religious establishment.

Pressure is being exerted to make Britain an increasingly secular state. We recognise that the past is far from glorious, the Lollards and Reformers were persecuted by Church and state, since the reformation there has been discrimination against non-conformists and Roman Catholics, and the same can be said of those of other religions. Nevertheless Britain retains a strong Christian basis in our public life and in education. Within this context our present freedoms and democracy have developed and flourished. Christians should want to influence public life for good and we should therefore recognise the benefits we currently have and the dangers of losing them or giving them away.