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WE ARE ANGLICANS

By David Phillips

The title of this article ought to be somewhat longer. One of our former Council members, Frank Knaggs, served for many years as a member of the Council for Christian Unity. Frank had one or two personalised items, in particular a ring and T-shirt, which he sometimes wore to ecumenical meetings. They bear the slogan “No Pope here, we are Anglicans”.

The Pope, or more properly the Roman Catholic Bishop of Rome will visit England and Scotland from 17th to 19th September of this year. In recent years political figures and many in the media have fawned all over the Pope. More recently however, there has been growing attacks on Rome by secular humanists and the homosexual lobbyists, together with the media, which is dominated by both. Whilst we do not wish to be sucked into the ungodly agenda of these groups nevertheless it is important to say that this visit is also unwelcome for other reasons.

What does it mean to be Anglican? Though it is not normally where people look for an answer part of the nature of Anglicanism is set out in the Coronation Oath Act of 1688. This Act applies still in England and Wales and its well known wording was used at the Coronation of the present Queen. The existence of this Act, is a denial to the claim of some that the United Kingdom is a secular state. The oath set down in the Act was made by the new monarch as a covenant between her and her people. It includes the famous words:

Will You to the utmost of Your power Maintain the Laws of God the true Profession of the Gospel and the Protestant Reformed Religion Established by Law?

It can be seen that the oath involves a commitment to maintain three things but for the purpose of this article it is the third that I wish to focus on. The words do not refer to the Church of England, but this Church is the embodiment of that phrase. Therefore in answer to the question what does it mean to be Anglican, or what is the Church of England, we can answer that it is protestant, reformed and established.

Protestant

The word Protestant derives from the Protestation at Speyer of 19 April 1529. Martin Luther had been banned from the Holy Roman Empire at the Diet of Worms in 1521. In 1526 the Emperor, Charles V, suspended the Edict of Worms and thus allowed the German states individually to choose to follow the evangelical faith. Three years later the Reichstag (effectively the parliament of the Empire) voted to suspend the suspension, thus outlawing Luther and the evangelicals again. The minority members of the Reichstag drew up a letter of protestation (*Instrumentum Appellationis*) which the Emperor's brother, who was presiding, refused to admit. They chose therefore to print the letter and make it public.

It is often asserted that Protestantism is by its nature negative because it has its origins in being against something. There is truth in this, but what the original Protestants were against was an attempt to suppress the truth and persecute true believers. The key elements of protestant are therefore first that it affirms the evangelical faith, that is the authority and supremacy of Scripture and that we are justified by faith and not by any other means. Secondly, it was therefore a rejection of the errors of medieval Catholicism, just as the historic creeds in upholding orthodoxy rejected various errors of their day. Thirdly, it was an affirmation of religious liberty in the face of the tyranny of Rome.

These characteristics are central to what it means to be Anglican and what the Coronation Oath is asserting. Our Articles set out clearly the key evangelical doctrines of justification by faith alone (Article 11), the sufficiency (Article 6) and supremacy of Scripture (Articles 20 & 21), the errors of Rome (sundry articles) and the rejection of the worldly pretensions of the Bishop of Rome (Article 37). What led up to the Coronation Oath Act of 1688 was another attempt to suppress truth and true believers, in the machinations of King James II.

The clause from Article 37 is well known “The Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this realm of England.” The papacy has not given up its political aspirations and the status of Vatican City, established by the Lateran Treaty of 1929 is part of the manifestation of that today. The United Nations grants observer status to The Holy See, but this is not the same as the Vatican City. The continuing law prohibiting our monarch from being a Roman Catholic is also a response to these claims to political power.

When the present Queen dies it is quite possible that parliament will rush through a repeal of the Coronation Oath Act and thus a new coronation oath.

Reformed

Some would see ‘reformed’ as simply meaning changed, which is to say that the Church of England has reformed itself so that it is now different to what it was before the Reformation. But Reformed means more than that, and again it is a positive affirmation.

From fairly early on the Protestant churches could be identified as belonging to three broad families – Lutheran, Reformed and Anabaptist. The Anglican Church, though indebted to Luther, is one of the Reformed Churches.

The distinction with the Anabaptists is most obviously seen in the retention by the Church of England of infant baptism, but its foundation is deeper. We are a Reformed Catholic church; we have retained ancient practices where these are not contrary to Scripture, even if some of them are not clearly set out in Scripture. Anabaptists tend more to the view that only those things set out in Scripture are acceptable. Thus we can argue a Biblical case for infant baptism, but must accept that it is not explicitly taught. We can see the roots of a separate episcopate in Scripture, but we do not see it as being required because overseers and presbyters are largely interchangeable terms in Scripture. We got rid of some medieval services and practices but not all.

The reason a Church must continue to reform is not because we believe we stopped short of an ideal, but because sin is always with us, old errors can creep back and new errors are always emerging.

The distinction with Lutheran Churches is historically most obvious in the doctrine of the sacraments. Luther’s teaching of consubstantiation appears to have been an attempt to reform the doctrine without losing something he was not willing to lose. Anglicans reject the view that the sacraments are just signs or tokens (Article 25). We assert that the sacraments are effectual signs (God does what the sign signifies), but the means by which they are effectual is faith. Thus, at the Lord’s Supper, a believer receives the body and blood of Christ “after an heavenly and spiritual manner” (Article 28).

Some of the classical statements of Reformed theology, for example, the Synod of Dort (1619) came later than the formularies of the Church of England. Yet, in most respects the key points such as predestination (Article 17) are to be found in Anglicanism. A possible exception is Covenant Theology, often used to justify infant baptism, which is not immediately obvious in our Articles and

Prayer Book, though if anyone can show me otherwise I would be grateful to hear.

Established

The Coronation Oath Act refers to the Protestant Reformed religion established by law and we are part of an established church. This is not unique, many countries have established churches (Finland has two) whilst others have other religions that are favoured in law. The Church of England is intertwined with the history of our nation. One aspect of establishment that is constantly under attack is the role of Bishops in the House of Lords, yet we should remember that the monarch of England has always had Bishops amongst their advisors, even before the formation of the single English nation, and the British likewise before them. On the other hand, until recently, clergy were not permitted to become MPs. This also reflects part of our establishment, to grant freedom to the Church, whilst restricting the ability of the Church as an institution to interfere in the role of the state. This is a deliberate response to the long years of conflict with the Roman See. The political aspirations of Rome in respect of England were firmly rebuffed by Henry VIII in the 1534 Act of Supremacy and in various other subsequent pieces of legislation. Establishment has been, and remains, part of the means of preserving the Church of England as a Protestant Reformed church.

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