

Do We Need a National Church?

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Thousands of people revel in singing with gusto at London's Royal Albert Hall at the end of the BBC's Promenade Concert season. The song is *Land of Hope and Glory*. The first verse expresses the pious hope, 'God who made thee mighty, Make thee mightier yet' .At the last Commonwealth Games, when the English won gold medals, the same song was sung, just as when the Welsh were victors they sang, *Land of my fathers*. Another song embedded in the folk religion of our country is *Jerusalem*. Not only the Women's Institutes across the country, but others too, enthusiastically sing, 'And did those feet in ancient time, walk upon England's mountains green?' That song voices the aspiration to labour and struggle to make our country the sort of place where 'Jerusalem' might be built. Whatever your estimate of the value of folk religion may be, it certainly is a fact of our national life.

Some speak of a set of universal religious needs we could describe as *folk religion* which call for a *natural priesthood*. (1) This need shows up especially in connection with death and prayer. It also emerged when a BBC interviewer was questioning a former member of the Shadow Cabinet on football hooliganism in the identity card debate. The Opposition member replied that it was not the Government's business to make people good, 'that was the job of the Archbishop of Canterbury'. Quite often it is the Church of England minister who finds himself expected to provide this *natural priesthood*. He can simply refuse to have any part in it, or he can seek to transform it into Christian ministry. (2)

On a BBC Radio 4 programme on modern communications there was a discussion on how these had reduced the world to a 'global village'. An author commented that if the world had become a village it was one without a centre, 'no village church and no major house'. There was a vacuum at its heart because one could not have a village simply by people communicating to make money out of each other. That idea of a nation having a *heart* is a strongly Biblical one. See how often Isaiah or Jeremiah describe the state of the *heart* of their nation. Where there is a *heart*, religion is not far away.

T. S. Eliot, discussing the question of ending the special relationship that the Church of England has with the State, wrote:

But we must pause to reflect that a Church, once disestablished, cannot easily be re-established, and that the very act of disestablishment separates it more definitely and irrevocably from the life of the nation than if it had never been established. The effect on the mind of the people of the visible and dramatic withdrawal of the Church from the affairs of the nation, of the deliberate recognition of two standards and ways of life, of the Church's abandonment of all those who are not by their profession within the fold - this is incalculable; the risks are so great that such an act can be nothing but a desperate measure. (3)

Without questioning the possibility of reforming the manner of the Establishment, such a withdrawal would create a vacuum indeed! It was a Methodist friend with whom I was discussing disestablishment who said, 'The removal of the Church of England's Established Church status would open the door to a multi-faith free-for-all with all the implications that this has for militant Islam.' I recall a well produced broad sheet from an Islamic society in my last, predominantly Muslim parish. Bold headlines declared the West to be corrupt. Only Islam would save it. Of course for Muslims, the separation of religion from the State, to which we in the West incline, is unthinkable and wrong. The cliché about nature abhorring a vacuum is apt here. History teaches - and you have only to look at North Africa to see what a militant Islam does - about religious vacuum.

For the late Canon Max Warren, 'established' meant 'recognized'; the Church was there already, long before the State chose to establish it by recognizing it. Both Church and State are under God's sanction and authority, he explained, quoting P. T. Forsythe: 'Citizenship taken seriously is a religious function.' (4)

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin (who was ordained to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Established Church of that country, later becoming a bishop of the Church of South India) said: *It seems to me that the principle that there is a church which accepts responsibility for the whole life of the nation and that there is in every parish a Christian body which accepts a responsibility for the whole of that parish, which doesn't exist for its own members but does exist for the sake of God's rule, God's reign in the whole of that parish is something very, very precious. Now of course, the abuse of that comes when the church pretends that there is no one else in the field.*

He went on to say that this attitude is less common, now that churches are friendlier to one another. He adds: *But the fundamental principle that the Church is for the nation, and that the parish church is for the parish, is precious and it would be a very great danger if one were to abandon it, root and branch, that the church should then become something which sees itself as existing for the sake of its own members .*

He is quite sure that there are certain elements in the present Establishment which could be reformed and changed but maintains that 'the basic responsibility of being the national church seems to me to be something that ought not to be thrown overboard' .(5)

The fact that the Church of England is a *Gospel* church according to its Articles of Religion (9, 11, 15, 18 and 31a), makes Bishop Newbigin's words even more important. A leading member of the Billy Graham English mission team commented that the part played by Anglican churches in that work was crucial. Such support sprang from the fact that the Church of England *is* a Gospel church. Our Articles and our reformed services put the cross of Jesus at the centre. In the Decade of Evangelism it is vital, as a former Director of Church Society, the Rt. Revd Dr David Samuel has said. that we put the cross of Christ where the Bible puts it. That will require a shift of emphasis by our church leaders. Nevertheless, as a *national* Gospel church we are particularly well placed to evangelize the nation.

However, although we might see practical reasons why the Church of England should remain established, evangelical Christians will want to ask if the arrangement is in keeping with Scripture. Our Reformers answered this question with an emphatic 'Yes' .Furthermore, they maintained that the monarch, as supreme over all the persons in the realm, should also be supreme governor of the Church of England. He (or she) does not of course, have authority thereby to minister the Word or Sacraments (Article 37). (6)

The Bible makes plain that governments are ordained by God. St Paul said this when the ruling Caesar of that time was Nero! (7) St Peter urges a high view of the State in a similarly hostile climate. (8) Nations are seen as bodies, not just a collection of individuals. They can repent as Nineveh did (see Jonah). They attract the wrath of God, as Amos makes plain. His message, *prepare to meet thy God*, was addressed to Israel as a nation, as were His words to Edom, Moab and in his first two chapters. Habakkuk describes Assyria as a *bitter and hasty nation* and over and over again in the Psalms the nations are addressed and invited to praise the Lord. When prophets like Daniel identified themselves with the sins of their nation and its fathers they were surely recognizing the unity of the persons in it. Jesus, in Matthew 23 vv 29-39 illustrated the same point, when he wept over Jerusalem. Acts 17 v 26 states the sovereign activity of God over *all* nations, including what their boundaries should be, and presents the demands of the Gospel to them all.

Granted that in a real sense a nation is a unity, a 'person', it is quite natural for it to have a recognized 'religion'. This is quite different from that special sense in which Israel was the chosen race. It is not the same as claiming that all the people in it are committed to that religion, whether it be Buddhist, Muslim or Christian. It is a case of defining that nation's identity in its religious aspect. There is always the danger that members of it may confuse the nominal label with the personal commitment that most religion requires. But this does not deny the truth of the solidarity of the nation as a body, and therefore, as possessing the power to recognize or ignore eternal realities.

Viewed in this light we can see that it is very important that both Houses of Parliament are opened every day with prayer. The provision in the armed forces, the prison service and health service for chaplaincies is an appropriate recognition that the nation has a 'heart' and therefore a religion. The central position which is given to the Bible at the coronation of a monarch and the fact that the whole of the ceremony is in a Christian religious service bears testimony to our Christian heritage, even though for a majority of ordinary people, as someone has wittily said, 'The Church of England is the church they choose to stay away from' And of course, more often than not, it is the place they choose for marriage and the burial of their dead. The Established Church also happens to be the only one which survives in many of the inner cities of our land. I recall a Christian of nonconformist background commenting that the national church is 'in the warp and woof of our national life'. Today that is still true.

In his book already quoted Max Warren sees the task of the national church

(and by this he means the Established Church) as being: to prophesy to the nation, to purify it and to prepare it for those changes in it which the God of all the earth will require.

What common sense awareness of God's providence in history and His revelation of Himself and His will in His Word point to is not a disestablished Church of England. That would be throwing away the baby with the bath water! Rather, we need a better Church of England, reformed in doctrine and morals and renewed by the Holy Spirit to be a better partner to the State with which God has seen fit to join it in centuries past.

It is with such matters in mind that Church Society has adopted the motto, *For Bible, Church and Nation*. If these concerns are yours, you can help to do something about them by becoming a member.

Written by Eddy Stride.

For Further Reading:-

The Godly Prince and the National Church by D J Dethridge, *Churchman*, Vol. 104 No 1, 1990.

A Church within a Nation - What price disestablishment? by Charles Hall, *Churchman*, Vol. No 4, 1993.

The Functions of a National Church by M Warren & R Johnston, Latimer House Reprint, 1984.

Nationhood.' Towards a Christian Perspective by R Johnston, Latimer House, 1980.

Church & State Under God by B Atkinson, Latimer House, 1982.

For a more Critical Approach:-

FID. DEF., *The Bond of Church & State*, P A Welsby, SPCK, 1962.

Natural Priesthood, The Priesthood of all Believers, C. Hart, *Anvil*, Vol. 6 No 3, 1989.

Footnotes :

(1) Natural Priesthood, The Priesthood of all Believers, C Hart, *Anvil*, Vol. 6 No 3, 1989.

(2) A more negative view is expressed in *The Gospel Community and its Leadership* by J Tiller & M Birchall (Marshalls), where 'cultic' religion is thought to smack of superstition and the occult, and therefore more likely to be a hindrance to evangelism. It is reviewed by Tony Higton in *Latirner Comment* 27. This argument would be more convincing if 'non-cultic' groups such as the Baptists and Brethren were doing better than the Church of England.

(3) *The Idea of a Christian Society* (11a9), pp 72, 73. New Edition, 1982.

(4) *The Functions of a National Church*, M Warren & R Johnston, Latinter House. Reprint, 1984, pp 17, 21.

(5) Anglican Evangelical Assembly, 1990.

(6) The Godly Prince and the National Church, D J Dethridge, *Churchman*, Vol. 104 No 1, 1990.

(7) Romans 13 v 1.

(8) 1 Peter 2vv 13-17.

For further articles and other issues see

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If you long to see the Church of England upholding a clear biblical faith and being a faithful witness in the nation then we invite you to join us. Please contact:

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