A Church within a Nation: What Price Establishment?[1]

CHARLES HALL

Introduction

It is hard to think of a period in modern history when so many far reaching changes have been set in motion—or have set themselves in motion—in so short a time. The most obvious examples are the Maastricht treaty, and the collapse of communism in eastern Europe. Here at home nothing is certain any more. Institutions and ideals that looked as if they were here for ever find themselves rocked by change, uncertainty and technology—be they the coal industry, the major political parties, the monarchy, the armed forces, the trades unions, the police, the family or broadcasting. The list is endless. Privatization, change, and short-termism are the orders of the day.

Where does the Church of England stand within the Nation to which it belongs and what of its established status?

Despite all the changes the English are by nature a conservative race. Continuity with the past is valued. Preservation orders are slapped on everything from decaying trees to red telephone boxes and ancient places of worship. This process finds tacit acceptance with the public. It is inconceivable that Windsor Castle will not, one way or another, be restored after the fire in 1992.

Our monarchy for instance, notwithstanding its present difficulties, has shown a remarkable resilience over the years, and an ability to adapt to changing times, and it still holds the affections and respect of most of the people. No 'emerging' nation would dream of giving to one family unique constitutional status and then telling the head that his position as head of state would be passed from parent to child in perpetuity. Our monarchy retains that right because it is old.

The established relationship of the Church of England to the Nation comes into this category of things. It is not even the largest church in the land. As Tony Benn once pointed out it is inconceivable that any Christian denomination would nowadays voluntarily hand over the right to appoint its leaders to the State, but such is the position of the Church of England as we have inherited it from the long distant past.

The privatization of the church is not apparently high on the government's agenda but it is a very live issue nevertheless. Perhaps this is because change is in the air everywhere. Lots of people within the Church of England would rally round the flag of disestablishment if it were ever raised in earnest. Nothing has done more to make this possible than the sad breakdown of the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales. Where would the church be, it is asked, if its constitutional head were to be a divorced man or woman?

In fact the Church like the Crown has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to changing expectations over the years. Under the Callaghan administration it received the right to nominate (though not appoint) its bishops. Politicians have huffed and puffed when the Church has spoken out on this or that issue in conflict with the government line, but establishment has survived. Might an issue one day arise which so divided government and church that politicians simply refused to countenance the privileged status of the Church of England any more? Or might a disestablishment movement emerge in the Church in response to some issue? If that happened would the Church have thought through the long term consequences of disestablishment—not only in the constitutional sense, but also in the effect it would have on the pastoral ministry at parish level? The worst response to present uncertainties is 'let drift'. We could drift into uncharted and dangerous waters.

There is a point of view that establishment is out of place in a plural society; that it is unwarranted privilege in the face of other denominations and other faiths; that it links the church with authority in a society which grows less deferential every year; that parish life becomes less parochial, more eclectic all the time; that social values and the church's values grow further apart with every year that passes; and that establishment poses the strange dilemma: we think the Nation is still partially Christian, so therefore we should retain establishment so we can evangelize the nation which we think is not really Christian any more!

A few years ago I devised a questionnaire which was circulated to a cross-section of clergy, laity and theological students in the Diocese of Southwell. It identified nine features of the Church of England and these were: liturgy, established status, episcopacy, ordered ministry, ancient buildings, thirty-nine articles, catholicity, access to community, and occasional offices. The purpose was to find out what importance my respondents attached to each of them. Eight people responded including three bishops and I make free use of the responses while accepting that they are now slightly dated.

Although my respondents did not invariable support my view I remained—and remain—convinced that it is not time to dismantle the established status of the Church, but that it continues under God to contribute to the extension of the Kingdom of Heaven in this Nation, while

also believing that other Christian denominations with their distinctive features do the same.

The Rise and Decline of Establishment in the Church in England

In the beginning was the Church. This point of view does not commend itself to politicians influenced by the humanist movement in Britain today. When the Romans left these shores at the beginning of the fifth century, our history came, if not to a full-stop, at least to a semi-colon. Civilization had depended on the steel framework of the legions, and when they were withdrawn, the country was at the mercy of whomever crossed the North Sea for the pickings. The Angles, Saxons and Jutes soon filled the power vacuum and very little of Roman Christianity survived the upheaval. In a few years the former Roman province became a cluster of seven kingdoms, controlled by whichever group from Jutland or North Germany had reached there first (apart from the Celtic fringe to the West).

It was the coming—or resurrection—of Christianity in the land that played the key rôle in reuniting and recivilizing the country. In 563 the Gospel crossed from Ireland to Scotland *via* Iona. In 634 Aidan was successfully evangelizing the North of England. Meanwhile Augustine came to the see of Canterbury in 597, and these two somewhat different kinds of Christianity eventually converged at the Synod of Whitby, 664. There, their differences were resolved, mostly in favour of the Canterbury version. Bringing as it did the prestige of ancient Imperial Rome, this was inevitable. Since civilization was based on Christianity, it was the Church which established the only Civil Service, elevated the ideal of kingship (as of divine origin), sanctioned the ideal of law and held aloft the ideal of unity.

It can be truly said that it was Christianity through the Church that lifted the nation from primaeval barbarism. It was, after all, the barbarians who constituted the major military threat to Imperial Rome during its latter days, and who eventually triumphed against that Empire. And it was from that same barbarous movement of peoples that the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, now masters of Britain, came.

Christianity was thus the major civilizing influence in the Nation, playing the rôle of 'light of the world' and 'salt of the earth'. Such a situation may be good for a nation for a time, but it is not necessarily good for the Church, which like all human institutions is subject to the dictum 'power corrupts'. However, the reason why religious dissent (or heresy) was deemed intolerable becomes obvious. It was a threat not only to the Church, but also to the civilized order itself. No wonder that it was dealt with severely.

The Church in those days could not have been described as 'established'. It was more nearly the case that the State was established, and existed by grace of the Church! It was intensely meaningful that the Church crowned the monarch. King Henry II fought and lost his battle

with Becket over Benefit of Clergy. If kings were appointed by God, then they were in reality appointed by the Church! A sea change was indicated in the first Statute of Praemunire in 1353 and then the Lollard movement, but the crisis came when King Henry VIII found himself unable to produce a male heir through Queen Katherine. Efforts to persuade the Pope to grant an annulment foundered for European political reasons, so in 1532 the Act in Restraint of Appeals began the process of subjugating the Church to the Crown, culminating in the first Act of Supremacy. This is the basis of establishment as we have received it today. In effect the Crown, while making no claims to clerical office, displaced the Pope as Supreme Head (or, as under Elizabeth I, Supreme Governor) of the Church of England. One very important consequence was that bishops were invariably appointed by the Crown. All this would undoubtedly have been permanently reversed in the reign of Mary (1553–58), had not constitutional reform been accompanied by Protestant Theology emanating from the Continent, so that change emerged and persisted in both governance and doctrine.

If the Reformation was that period of history during which the Church of England acquired its established status, it was not merely the nationalization of the Church, the victory of the secular power over a very powerful spiritual estate. A political *coup d'état* it may have been, but it was more lastingly the event which dethroned the supremacy of the clergy, and enthroned the status of the Christian laity. The concept of the godly prince, as defined by Richard Hooker, sixteenth century apologist for the Elizabethan settlement, found concise expression in Article 37 of the Thirty-nine Articles, 'We give not to our princes the ministering either of God's Word, or the Sacraments'. Hooker notes:

> their power is termed supremacy as being the highest, not simply without exception or anything. For what man is so brain sick as not to except in such speeches God himself, the King of all dominion? Who doubteth but that the King who received it, must hold it of, and under the law according to the old axiom, 'The King assigns to the law that power which the law has assigned to him'. And again'The King ought not to be under man but under God and the Law'.[2]

Whatever power the State exercised over the Church, Hooker considered it important, not for power's sake, but for the spiritual well-being of the people.

> A gross error it is to think that regal power ought to serve for the good of the body and not of the soul; for men's temporal peace and not for their eternal safety: as if God had ordained kings for no other end and purpose but only to fatten up men like hogs and to see that they have their mast.[3]

In this was enshrined the high calling of the State, and in addition the rightful dignity of the royal priesthood of the laity. The latter finds expres-

sion today not merely in the supreme governorship of the Crown, but also in the House of Laity of the General Synod. It is an aspect of the Church of England often forgotten by those who would quickly draw us into reunion with Rome.

It is fair to add, however, that Hooker's whole ecclesiastical polity envisaged an ongoing state of affairs in which membership of the church and of the nation were coterminous. Hooker's society could conceive of no other situation. *Cuius regio, eius religio.* Dissent was regarded as a dangerous political threat in a society which overwhelmingly professed religion, just as it is today in certain Islamic states. The forces of erosion of such unity were well advanced by the turn of the seventeenth century, and diversity did indeed lead to deep disharmony and ultimately the Civil War (parallelled in Europe by the Thirty Years' War). It took the Church and the State a long time to recognize that the pluralistic society had really arrived, and for religious tolerance to be extended, first to the dissenters, then ultimately to the Roman Catholics.

Men and women of good will today often feel threatened by seemingly endless attacks on those institutions on which our security rests, the Church, the Crown, parliamentary democracy, and so on. To them the Victorian era seems an age of glorious prosperity, moral rectitude, stability and peace, a position impossible to better. They ignore the facts of history which were that revolution of the French kind was narrowly averted, that the Crown passed through a period of such unpopularity that the republican movement seemed poised at one time to carry everything with it, and that churchmen went to prison in protest at the establishment of the Church.

As pluralism advanced, Christian thinkers produced ideas which to us, one hundred and fifty years on, seem absurd. One of the best known was Thomas Arnold, pioneer in education, and Headmaster of Rugby. The solution to the problem, as he saw it, was to broaden the Church to embrace dissentient views. If the nation was no longer willing to adhere to the comprehensiveness of the Elizabethan Settlement, this must be because it was not comprehensive enough, and he advocated a sort of sliding scale of doctrine which, though not embracing Roman doctrine, would accommodate virtually everybody else.

A more sensitive point of view was advocated by F.D. Maurice who, like Hooker before him, saw a necessary unity between Church and State, the State being potentially

> an excellent admonisher to the Church respecting her inward corruptions, because it comes in contact with those outward evils which are the fruits of them, even as the Church is a most excellent admonisher to the State respecting its sins.[4]

For Maurice it was important for the two to maintain their distinctive rôles. Integrity would be best preserved by union and partnership, not by

separation. 'A national Church strong in the conviction of its own distinctive powers paying respectful homage to those of the State'.[5]

It was just this 'respectful homage' which the founders of the Oxford Movement found impossible to pay. Appalled by the increasing secularization of the Nation and the drift away from the rock-like foundations of Christian belief, they saw their representatives in Parliament influenced by Arnold's comprehensiveness. In these circumstances it became anathema to them that a Parliament dominated by such liberal thinking should continue to exercise so tight a control of the affairs of the Church, such that 'no single bishop can so much as appoint the Ember Day prayer to be used on the week preceding his day for ordinations, should he see cause to change the latter. The only changes ever made in our Prayer Book are made by an order of the Queen in Council.'[6] In John Keble's words:

> We are the one religious body in the Queen's dominions to which the following privileges are expressly denied: To declare our own doctrines, to confirm, vary, and repeal our own canons, to have a voice in the nomination of our own chief pastors, to grant or withhold our own sacraments according to our own proper rules. If these disadvantages are inseparable from the position of our establishment, then establishment must go.[7]

Whilst some transferred their allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church, others were more confident in the ability of establishment to adapt itself to the changing times. It was they who, eventually, were proved right, though many continued to work for change in the established relationship from within. Newman was among those who believed that change could not come. Even so, from the middle of the nineteenth century the tide began to run in favour of loosening the control of the State over the Church without formally severing the connexion. Resumption of the discussion of business in the Convocation of Canterbury in 1852 was followed by the Representative Church Council (incorporating laity) in 1904. This in turn became the Church Assembly in 1919, and then the General Synod and associated tiers of synodical government in 1969. The ongoing story of this process is the subject of this essay.

The Archbishop's Commission on Church and State 1970 (the 'Chadwick Report') reflected both points of view. While seeking to preserve the authority and status of the 1662 Prayer Book, it wanted self-government to take a significant step forward without actual disestablishment. This, it felt, was 'impracticable in the present state of opinion', and was something which 'most of us would dislike. . . . The people of England still want to feel that religion has a place in the land to which they can turn on the too rare occasions when they think they need it.' This rather weak conclusion, though it was the view of the majority of the Commission, was also the subject of written dissent from within it. Three distinguished members of that Commission wrote memoranda of dissent as appendices to the Report itself. Miss Valerie Pitt's objection centred on

the belief that any influence of the State in the affairs of the Church was a denial of the authority of God, and that the Church, like any other institution, was psychologically handicapped if it did not carry responsibility for its own decisions and actions. Peter Cornwell believed that establishment as enjoyed by the Church of England represented unwarranted privilege, as against other denominations presumably, but also, that the image of the Crucified Servant was inconsistent with the prestigious status of establishment and representation in the House of Lords (he has since become a Roman Catholic). All of that was written some twenty-three years ago, and since that time no serious moves have been made to disestablish the Church from the State, although certain adjustments have been made to the relationship between the two, for example, the rights of the Church concerning appointment of bishops. On the other hand, it certainly is the case that powerful voices are even now actively seeking a hearing so that the process of dismantling establishment may be taken forward. Recent adjustments to the relationship are perceived as steps towards that ultimate goal. Of the fact that the tight control exercised by the State is appropriately loosening up, there can be no doubt; but that does not mean that disestablishment is inevitable.

Institution within Constitution

Every church has a relationship with the State of a kind, a constitution and a legal status, by which it is granted certain legal responsibilities and exemptions. For example, all major denominations are represented and recognized in the services of the Crown through their chaplaincies. It is peculiar to the Church of England that it is in some sense the property of the State (through the supreme headship of the monarch) and in return has a place within the corridors of power (through the bishops in the House of Lords) and a claim on the spiritual and moral values of the people, however tenuous.

To many people denominations are of no relevance in today's world. But it is still the case that most of us live within them. Some people feel free to flit between them, when they move house for instance, but most still feel bonded to the denomination of their upbringing or background.

We now have a complex situation in which the denominations identify us, but unlike the time before the beginning of this century, they do not keep us completely apart.

In responding to my questionnaire about the Church of England and its distinctive features nearly every group put ancient buildings at the bottom of the list. The students put access to the community first or second, and establishment last or second to last. Clergy over forty-five roughly followed this pattern. Senior laymen place access to the community fifth and establishment last. It became clear that establishment was of minor interest to any group, but access to the community was very important to every group.

It is failure to see the connexion between the two that is worrying. To disestablish the Church might have advantages but they would be short

term. If establishment were to go, because nobody was interested in it, then the historic involvement with the community we have always enjoyed might follow. We could become much as the Roman Catholic Church is perceived in an average English parish—fine for those of that persuasion, but not for us. The occasional offices are vital points of contact between the local church and community but if there ceased to be any general expectation that we would perform them except for our committed membership—a more than possible long term consequence of disestablishment—then that important link would eventually wither. In an age of declining interest in Christianity the pressure for short term advantage is very strong, but if that means the Church retreating from its pastoral commitment to the Nation, it should be firmly resisted. It is not unlike closing all Britain's pits for the short term economic advantages of North Sea gas, when those very pits might in the long term be needed again. In the event of a recovery of interest in the things of Christ—a revival—we might need that relationship again.

British institutions often adapt themselves to the changing times, and still emerge with important contributions to make to the community. What leaves the Church most bewildered is the change of moral values in society, which have moved away from those traditionally held by the Church. Most obvious are questions of sexual morality, marital fidelity and divorce. There have been three major reports about the remarriage of divorced persons in church, and none of them has led to a satisfactory resolution of the matter or any real change.

Arnold Dallimore, in his beautifully produced biography of George Whitefield, describes the spiritual, social and moral conditions in England in the years prior to the Evangelical Revival of 1739, and there are striking similarities to our own times. The restoration of King Charles II in 1660 had led to the rejection of Puritanism and then to a period of unfettered licentiousness which England, to its sorrow, learned also brought lawlessness and violence. Crime figures soared, so Parliament increased the punishments but it made no difference; the criminals only became harder. Of the press, Dean Stanhope described certain productions as,

> . . . those monsters of irreligion and profaneness . . . heresy . . . schism . . . sedition . . . scandal . . . malice . . . detraction . . . obscenity . . . ribaldry . . . which mercenary wretches, devoid of shame, published for the sake of a paltry present gain.

A London magistrate, Henry Fielding, said of the Gin Craze—equivalent to the present drug abuse problem—'Should this continue during the next twenty years . . . there will be few of the common people left to drink it'. The rise of Deism devalued Christianity so the God of holiness was removed from men's minds, as the New Age Movement does today. Bishop Butler said sceptism was now so rampant that Christianity was treated as though 'it was now discovered to be fictitious . . . the subject of mirth and ridicule'.

Plus ça change, plus c'est le même chose. It is part of history that this unhappy situation did not last for ever. Due in no small measure to the Wesleyan Revival the traditional Christian values of the nation eventually reasserted themselves and social conditions also began to improve. The pendulum swung to what we call Victorian prudery. Things in our time in England may get much worse before they get better as they did for those who cared about such things two and a half centuries ago. But who is to say it is time to privatize Christianity, finally and for ever, now more than it was then?

Our difficulty is that we like short term results. We project present trends into the far-distant future as though they were already established fact. We want our institutions to suit us exactly as for *now*, and we do not see that future generations might regret hasty decisions taken to suit our ephemeral circumstances. Although the 'God-framework' to society is more and more eroded with each passing decade, it does not mean that the situation is irreversible. At the present time churches become more and more 'member-centred'. The ecclesiastical framework, under establishment, however, is still there. One day, under God, a major revival of interest in Christianity could take place. When this has happened in the past, it has nearly always been spearheaded by the Established Church. This was even true of Methodism, which was cradled from within the Church of England, or at least by certain of its ministers. It was true of the Edwardian Elizabethan Protestant movement, as of the Victorian Oxford Movement. Billy Graham's missions in England were spearheaded by the Established Church—or at least by some of its ministers.

To distance ourselves from the nation by pursuing disestablishment, would be perceived as the Church saying to the nation, 'You no longer seem interested in us these days, so we are finished with you'. Given disestablishment, Christianity in England would continue. House churches in suburbia would flourish, many Anglican parishes would still be strongly supported. But England as a whole would become increasingly godless; the sheep would lack a shepherd. By rejecting the right of the Nation to have a say in our affairs, we would throw away our right to have a say in theirs. Dr. Carey is a household name but how many English clergy or laity could even name the Archbishop of the disestablished Church in Wales?

If the moral, spiritual and social climate of England is at odds with that of the Church, then the same is true of the political climate, as we have seen under recent governments, Conservative and Labour. It was under a Labour government that legislation relating to a whole range of social issues including abortion and the practice of homosexuality were either repealed or greatly relaxed. Under both Labour and Conservative governments, divorce has become much easier, and the foundation of marriage and family life thus undermined. The present Conservative government is attempting to remove all restrictions on Sunday trading. In 1982

Archbishop Runcie preached his famous 'Falklands Sermon' in St. Paul's Cathedral, refusing to allow the Church to be used as a vehicle for a State Jingoistic celebration. Instead, he insisted on equal concern for the victims of both sides of that short but sharp conflict. In 1985, the Board for Social Responsibility published 'Faith in the City'. As with the Falklands Sermon, the fury of certain politicians was aroused. It was asserted that the Church's rôle should be confined to purely spiritual affairs, that meddling in politics (as it was described) was inappropriate to a Church that claimed the privileges of establishment. Thus there have been rifts between the Church and government. The fires of possible disestablishment have been fuelled by all this, within and without the Church.

But establishment does not imply complete agreement between church and government. Other institutions are 'established' within the State, yet retain independence of speech and opinion. The B.B.C. is one. Under its Charter, its relationship with the State is clearly defined, yet it is also part of a free press, required to make independent judgments and call in question the actions and statements of government. Independence is fundamental to the administration of law and justice. Our courts derive their authority from the Lord Chancellor—himself a member of the government yet government itself is subject to those same courts and their adjudications. Why should the Church not also be free to make value judgments on matters of concern to the national community without forfeiting its established status? To those who say that the Church would be freer to declare its opinion were it not shackled with establishment, the answer is, that may be so, but it is doubtful that the opinion would be reported.

The presence of bishops in the House of Lords provides the Church, indeed the whole Christian community, with a platform from which to voice a Christian view of affairs. Most peers who sit in the House of Lords do so because politics is their first love. This is not usually so with bishops. Yet, surprisingly, few even of the most radical respondents to my questionnaire found the bishops' contributions 'a wasted opportunity'. So it is probably the case that a useful job is done, and it is well-known that bishops carefully research their speeches before making them. Bishops are there because of their professional ability (which cannot be said of hereditary peers). Their presence raises the profile of the Church in public affairs. If some future government decided to reform the House of Lords, then this platform for an informed Christian contribution might be lost.

If the Church retains the privilege of representation in the House of Lords, then conversely the State claims the right of a say in the appointment of bishops. This situation is disliked by many in today's church, in that power exercised in the Church by the State is seen as an affront to the Kingdom of God. The theological basis of this arrangement may indeed by dubious, especially given the increasing pluralism of the Nation (in contrast to the situation at the time of the Elizabethan Settlement). In accepting this as a weakness of establishment, one can go on to mitigate it

in the following ways. First, the State, aware of the Church's feeling, modified the procedure during the Callaghan administration. The views of the vacant see are now represented on the Crown Appointments' Commission. Two names are submitted to the Prime Minister, who is expected to choose the first one. The Crown (through the Prime Minister) has thus surrendered rights of nomination. If the Prime Minister declines to accept either of the two names, then it would be for the Church to submit two more. This is a considerable, and wholly appropriate, concession to the Church. It would make it difficult for a hostile political party to pack the leadership of the Church with people favourable to its own viewpoint.

Secondly, the notion that bishops alone exercise power and influence within the Church would make most of them smile. Many of them find the Church hopelessly committee-bound. There are checks and balances to the whims of state-appointed prelates, despite the increased centralization of power in recent years. Besides, there is no evidence that Prime Ministers exercise their patronage lightly or in a partisan way in this matter.

Thirdly—and here we enter the realm of speculation—even if we were disestablished, it seems likely that some process of consultation would still take place about appointments to high office in the Church. It is unlikely that the Roman Catholic Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, the leading Roman Catholic churchman in Britain, is appointed without first being checked out with the political establishment. The Roman Catholic Church would hardly run the risk of unnecessary conflict with the State. So we are really talking about the State's right of veto, rather than patronage, which, is a small price to pay for the privilege of partnership with the State.

Privilege was one of the objections raised by the Revd. Peter Cornwell in his Additional 'Note of Dissent' to the 1970 Chadwick Report 'Church and State'. In Mr. Cornwell's view the Commission underestimated the offence given to loyal members of the Church as well as its critics, in that 'the community of the Crucified Servant accepted too easily a privileged status'. He went further. Delusions of grandeur would continue to be encouraged within the Church itself. People would be led to think that belief in Christianity was something they inherited without personal decision and responsibility. 'There is a point where Anglican generosity becomes Anglican wool'. This may partly explain why Mr. Cornwell, in 1985, converted to the Roman Catholic Church. His objections are fair ones, but were not supported by respondents to my questionnaire. In no group did a majority think that ours was a position of privilege.

It has to be said, however, that many clergy working in Urban Priority Areas feel that the ties with the state put them at a disadvantage with parishioners. My own inner-city ministry experience brought the point home sharply to me. It is easily dismissed because inner-city people have little 'clout'. It bears out Mr. Cornwell's point about the 'Crucified Servant'. The proper response is that if the Church were not established, it would probably hardly be in the inner city at all by this time. It is only

because of our responsibility to the whole country that we maintain a universal parochial system, requiring parishes in suburban areas to support the inner-city and rural parishes through the 'Quota' system. No other denomination claims such overall coverage today, and none makes so sacrificial a financial commitment.

As for the question of privilege in comparison with other churches, the overwhelming feeling among my respondents was that it was an advantage to the whole church in England to have the Anglicans established. An obvious example is chaplaincies in our forces, hospitals, and prisons. The State is prepared to pay for their services believing them to be essential to this work. It is on the coat tails of the Anglicans that the Free Churches and Roman Catholics have similar opportunities. On the question of general influence within the nation, the attitude of most Free Churchmen was expressed by a distinguished Pentecostal pastor, in Nottingham: 'You Anglicans, you have the influence. Use it!'

One of the Chadwick Report's major recommendations, that final control of worship should be vested in the General Synod, found expression in the Worship and Doctrine Measure, 1974. That has found a general degree of acceptance within the Church, so that fears of another 1928 Prayer Book débâcle have mostly disappeared. Yet, as Tony Benn M.P. argued in a lecture in St. James', Piccadilly in 1983, given the established position of the Church, that Act is capable in theory of being repealed, and, given different circumstances, our hard won freedoms could prove illusory. But that is a risk we cannot avoid and it also applies to all hard won freedoms from *Habeas Corpus* to the enfranchisement of women. Democracy itself is similarly vulnerable.

It was part of the 'settlement' of the 1974 Worship and Doctrine Measure that the *Book of Common Prayer* should be preserved unaltered, deposited as a yardstick and standard of doctrine. As Archbishop Michael Ramsey put it:

> If the State gives privilege to one particular church, it must know the identity of that church . . . The place of the Prayer Book as a visible standard which may be used when it is asked for is a mark of the church's identity.

Peter Cornwell (this time in his book *Church and Nation*) deplores this situation, arguing that Rite A Communion expresses a far better understanding of the Holy Communion than Cranmer.[8] Be this as it may (and it is not an absolutely universally agreed viewpoint), the fact is that where no standard of doctrine exists, a church is vulnerable over the years to all kinds of 'strange' doctrines. The Roman Catholic Church (now home for Mr. Cornwell) knows this very well. It was sad for Methodism, given such an excellent and high-flying start, that no binding standard of teaching ever existed. Outsiders with conviction looking in on Anglicanism (or maybe considering ordination) can find a home among us because we at least have a standard of doctrine.

All this about the Prayer Book is peculiarly relevant to ecumenism. To

Peter Cornwell, it is a direct hindrance to advance down that road, a possible *rigor mortis*. Malcolm Muggeridge once described an assembly of the World Council of Churches in this way: 'They could agree about virtually everything because they believed virtually nothing'. That might well be the Vatican's view of ecumenism if the truth were known. At the very least the Prayer Book represents a position from which we negotiate without losing our identity. If serious negotiations were begun with the Roman Catholic Church about unity, then the establishment of the Church would certainly feature high in those debates, and Parliament would suddenly become very interested, especially in the light of the continuing political struggle in Northern Ireland.

The Established Church and Parish Ministry

Attitudes are often struck by the use of language. Certain words are evocative and turn people towards or away from certain positions. For example the word 'sect' suggests extremism, so when it said that disestablishment would 'turn the Church of England into a mere sect', people do not want that label, so they turn away from disestablishment—just because of a word. Correspondingly the phrase 'folk religion' suggests ignorance, superstition, half truth. So, when people say that establishment encourages 'mere folk religion', then the very phrase encourages people to turn away from establishment, because it seems to support that sort of thing.

The Church of England is located in the parishes. That is where the human and pastoral base is to be found. So the advantages and disadvantages of establishment at parish level are at least as important as those found at national and constitutional level. The implications of change are, in the long run, considerable.

Every Church lives with certain background circumstances which probably do not exactly correspond with our favourite biblical model. We may be in a 'missionary situation' in England, but it is not the same as that faced by the apostles. Then, no Christian culture of any kind existed as it does in our country today—to some extent. The Church could never have gained a foothold in Roman Asia without the 'plus' of the Holy Spirit, 'signs following' and miracles.

Today our evangelism in England depends more than we care to admit on this given cultural acceptability which is not shared by, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses (it does not work for us either when we seek to reach, say, Muslim people). The more strongly that cultural attitude is held in a given parish, the better chance we have of being successful. This is why the church of all denominations tends to be relatively strong in suburban areas but relatively weak in more urban ones. It is not that we should go on depending on this for ever but, just as Paul went to the Jew first, so we should not reject it as irrelevant either.

Disestablishment might in the long run weaken this situation for us as well as for our Free Church brothers and sisters. It is not certain that the Church of

England could adapt to a completely new state of affairs in a comparatively short period of time. Perhaps the Lord has some other expression of Christianity in mind for the long term future of the Church in England, but until that becomes clear we are wise not to throw away what we have inherited.

Just as our Free Church brothers and sisters often humbly recognize the benefit that our established status conveys to them, so we in our turn at parochial level have to recognize that our approach may not reach everybody, that the Nation can only be reached in partnership with others. Thus, for example, the Salvation Army and the black Pentecostal churches in our inner cities 'reach parts that other churches cannot reach'.

For our part, our ministry has traditionally been available to all residents of the parish for baptisms, weddings and funerals. In return we are accepted as part of the community with all the opportunities for ministry and evangelism which that brings. This is still the basis of Anglican pastoral practice in England. Those who put up too many barriers forget that they would not even receive enquiries if the whole church did the same as they.

There is a certain amount of double thinking in our midst. We cannot condescendingly dismiss 'mere folk religion' and then go on to complain that children today don't know the first thing about the Bible'. Obviously the vague, half-informed ideas people have about our faith do not make them into anything remotely resembling committed Christians. But it is ground in which seeds of the real thing might one day take root and grow, and any approach to parish life is nothing if it does not take the long view.

Equally we have to be realistic about success. A man or woman has a good show going in their parish; a lot of people are at the mid-week prayer meeting; the family service (if it is still called that) is well supported; and that situation is repeated up and down the land. But ninety-five percent of the parish—and of England—is completely untouched. As the Church of England, it is the parish—and England—that we should be concerned about. But today despite much structural mission activity, church members tend to be inward looking, having few friends outside the Christian community, often going on holiday to events where the Gospel can be internally strengthened, rather than externally communicated; and buying books in Christian bookshops not much frequented by the public at large; thus taking trade out of the chain retail bookshops and leaving that field wide open to New Age and occult material.

In days gone by the Church not only influenced culture, but was the main basis of it. The discipline of marriage was not a great problem. Fidelity within marriage was the standard (if not practice). Princes may have had their mistresses, but somehow society managed to live with this. There was probably much hypocrisy, allowing the Church to maintain a safe distance from the murky things of life, since no one expected it to vary its standards to the slightest degree.

Nowadays different circumstances prevail. Hypocrisy is challenged, and the Church itself has to face the question: what do we do about people who

are getting married while their spouse is still alive? In deciding to hold the line and say officially 'No' to people who want re-marriage, another problem: why deny a church wedding to couples who had honestly faced their difficulties with their spouse and now sincerely intend to start again with someone else, whilst at the same time permitting a couple who have lived in sin for years free access to our marriage rites? This is not the place to answer such questions except in so far as they touch the question of the relationship between the Nation and the Church. One solution that has been canvassed would take all marriage registration out of the hands of the Church and hand it to the State. Then, after a civil ceremony, the Church would be free to do as it liked with whom it liked. There would no longer be any obligation on our part to marry all comers, and we would be free to take part in some form of prayer or dedication service with couples of our choice.

Such a way forward has its attractions, and many clergy will be drawn to it as a way out of their pastoral difficulties. But it will not solve the problem. It ignores the very nature of marriage, which should not be described as 'Christian Marriage', but as 'Holy Matrimony'. For marriage is not, basically, a Christian ordinance, but a Creation one. It was Adam who was told 'It is not good that the man should be alone;' (Genesis 2:18) and it was Adam's marriage which St. Paul described as 'a great mystery' (Ephesians 5:31). The Early Church does not appear to have solemnized marriages, but it did recognize them, whether the couple were Christian or not. So Jewish marriage was recognized, as were the marriages of Roman officials. It follows, then, that any monogamous marriage, properly, solemnly and lawfully entered into, is a marriage in the sight of God.

What should be the Church's rôle in a day when the bonds of marriage are much looser than before? We see ourselves as trustees, custodians of the idea and ideal of marriage, and do our best to see that it is part of our commitment to society to preserve that ideal. We may regret that some marriages solemnized in our churches eventually break up, but the couples would have come together one way or another anyway, even if we had not married them. This is not mere pragmatism. It is applied biblical teaching. By denying Christian rites to the public, we would be undermining the public godly concept of marriage. Conversely, by thoroughly preparing those planning to be married in church, we are positively upholding the institution of marriage in our society. By welcoming people with little Christian profession, we are not cynically pandering to those who 'want a white wedding'. Instead, by providing the right balance of ceremonial and solemnity (blended appropriately with joy and thanksgiving) we can hope, God permitting, to fix the couple's wedding day in their minds as the special occasion which determined their commitment to each other and to their children, besides helping them to seek the blessing of God.

Those who answered the questionnaire generally agreed with this point of view. There was overwhelming support for parishes becoming more

involved in marriage preparation, and little support for discontinuing church registration.

Those with difficulties about infant baptism are on stronger ground. Baptism being a dominical sacrament involving faith and commitment, it may therefore be assumed to be restricted to those who can express that faith and make that commitment. Nothing less is demanded in our 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and *The Alternative Service Book 1980* rites, though the latter properly ascribes responsibility to parents as well as godparents. Clearly there was some disquiet among students and younger clergy about the clergy's canonical obligation to baptize all comers, but there was no consistent wish expressed to amend the Canon.

Our difficulties lie in the expectations of the public which we ourselves have fostered.

> The curates of every Parish shall often admonish the people, that they defer not the Baptism of their children longer than the first or second Sunday next after their birth, unless upon a great and reasonable cause be approved by the Curate (1662 Prayer Book, Baptism rubric).

It is not easy to stand such a policy on its head in a generation or two, whatever our consciences may dictate, and there can be little doubt that our practice contains an element of pragmatism. Numbers of applications by parents for infant baptism have steadily declined over the years, and varies considerably from region to region, and from one type of parish to another. Nevertheless in most places the number of approaches made to us exceeds those made to other denominations.

Although it is possible in practice for an experienced minister to avoid doing a baptism without appearing to refuse, and although the General Synod could in theory change Canon Law requiring us to baptize all applicants, neither would really solve the problem. We should still find ourselves turning many families away at the only point of contact we have with them. More than that, we should be perceived as guilty of that most emotive of sins, rejecting young children.

Ronald Williams, a former Bishop of Leicester, wrote as follows:

> I believe it is better for the Church to ask no questions, if the questions are meant to produce evidence, on the strength of which Baptism can be deserved or earned. Our salvation is not of works lest any man should boast. . . . The idea that Tommy can be baptized if his elder brother Billy comes to Sunday School, and not otherwise, seems to me quite heretical. Christ died for Tommy whatever Billy does. . . . As P.T. Forsyth once said, 'We live in a redeemed World'. Why not act accordingly?[9]

That is liberal teaching, but it expresses what many people feel, and it fits in very well with establishment practice. Surely, however, there is a middle way.

We are entitled as pastors and ministers of the Word to ask parents why they want baptism for their children. We are also entitled to explain what the vows mean, and what they are undertaking in bringing a child to baptism. Finally, we are entitled to advise them that they are not ready to make those promises, especially if something in their situation is in our opinion inconsistent with the baptism promise. Ultimately, however, the decision remains theirs. In that case, we quieten our consciences, since responsibility before God is now placed firmly with parents and we do not know the mind of God. Our position is like a surgeon advising a patient about an operation; it is treating others as responsible beings, as we ourselves like to be treated, and it is entirely consistent with establishment.

Dead Issue or Positive Benefit?

Peter Cornwell concludes his book *Church and Nation* by pleading for a renewed interest in disestablishment, and says:

> In looking for prophetic simplicity and political investment, I find establishment plunging us into a middle region, neither seriously prophetic nor political, and imposing a model of Christian service which is inappropriate in a pluralist society.[10]

The hidden assumption in this statement is that changing the status of the Church would have no effect on its standing in the Nation, and thus that our 'prophetic' or other utterances would receive the same attention as they do now. This might well prove not to be the case. Far from increasing our influence, it might considerably diminish it.

It is reasonable to compare the Church of England with the Church in Wales which was disestablished in 1920. In 1963 at the Toronto Conference the then Bishop of Llandaff scathingly attacked the Church of England as being the only church represented which still retained an established status, apparently unable to rectify its position. He naturally received a good round of applause, but omitted to mention that his own church was forced into disestablishment because of its weak, minority, position. It is a sad fact that the Church in Wales receives little media attention.

It would satisfy some members of the Church of England if the Church itself had the first and last say in the appointment of bishops, but it is doubtful if a truly satisfactory way of doing it could be found. It is unlikely that it would make any difference to the quality of those appointed, but it is likely that it would diminish their standing in the country. A man appointed by the Crown has a special kind of acceptability.

The 1981 Report of the Church of England's Partners in Mission consultation (*To a Rebellious House*) had this to say about establishment:

> In discussing this we have come to see that the real issue is not so much the precise organisational arrangements . . . as the impression so often given

> that the Church of England is a church of the privileged which fails to address itself to where things actually hurt, where the good news of the Gospel can be discovered and proclaimed. So we do not propose any effort to restructure the Establishment; it is the attitude so often dominant in the Church of England that must be transformed.[11]

In the 1980s the Church seemed to recover its nerve. There was the 'Church and the Bomb' report and the Falklands sermon. Then there was 'Faith in the City' and Terry Waite. All these enjoyed many column inches and showed the Church convincingly and effectively engaging with the issues of the time. Sadly in this Decade of Evangelism the Church has been dogged with difficulties and uncertainties—the women's ministry question, financial problems, declining statistics and the misdemeanour of a bishop. These things have dominated our press image and diminished the Church's standing.

Nevertheless, all the while that there is a Church which 'belongs' to the Nation, both the State and the Nation are acknowledging that human institutions are not the final word. There is a power greater than Crown or Parliament. So long as the sovereign is crowned according to Christian rites, that belief will continue to be fostered, and it points the way to the revelation of God through Christ, and to the churches as the schools in which faith is learned.

Contrariwise, the belief that complete separation between the two is the way forward will lead to the view that faith is an option for those who are interested in that sort of thing, but, for the rest, only a material world is recognized. If that comes about, it will probably not be because the Nation itself wants it, but because a small minority in the Church have pushed hard and the rest have uncritically acquiesced in what they have had to say.

CHARLES HALL is vicar of Stapleford and area dean of Beeston, diocese of Southwell.

NOTES

1 This paper is adapted from a project submitted to St. George's House, Windsor Castle and is published with its permission.
2 R. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book 8, 1648.
3 *Ibid.*
4 F.D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ*, Macmillan, London, 1883, Vol. 2, p. 232.
5 *Ibid.*,p. 297.
6 W.G. Ward, *The Ideal of a Christian Church*, James Tooney, 1844, p. 109.
7 J. Keble, quoted in Georgina Battiscombe's *John Keble*, Constable, 1963, p. 301.
8 P. Cornwell, *Church and Nation*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, pp. 90, 91.
9 R.R. Williams, *What's Right with the Church of England?* Lutterworth, 1966, p. 79.
10 *Op. cit.*
11 Church of England's Partners in Mission Report, *To A Rebellious House*, ed., P. Moore, S.P.C.K., Church House Publishing, London, 1981, para. 135.