

Editorial

In the wake of the recent divorce of the Prince and Princess of Wales, there has been much talk of reforming the monarchy. Little of this talk has any real bearing on the problems of the Royal Family, but a lot of it is concerned with the relationship of both the Crown and the state to the Church of England. Somewhat to the surprise of those who imagine that anything goes in our overly permissive church, there is still no canonical provision for the remarriage of divorced persons. In other words, should the Prince of Wales wish to remarry, as newspaper reports suggest that he does, he will find it difficult, if not impossible, to become Supreme Governor of the Church of England. It is a sign of the morality of our times that although there are some people who suggest that he should not remarry, or that if he does, he should renounce his right of succession, the prevailing opinion seems to be that it is the Church which should retire from the scene and allow the monarchy to become secularized.

Unfortunately, a good deal of this discussion has been conducted in supreme ignorance of the background and the issues involved, with the result that many of the solutions which have been proposed are either impossible, unworkable or simply irrelevant. Let us take, for example, the question of the royal title, *Defender of the Faith*. It is widely assumed that this has something to do with the establishment of the Church of England, and that dropping it would be a way of secularizing the monarchy. The Prince of Wales has gone on record saying that he would like to be called simply *Defender of Faith*, as an ecumenical gesture which would embrace even non-Christians.

In fact, of course, the title *Defender of the Faith* has nothing to do with the Church of England, and is not a sign of the Church-state connection. Henry VIII desperately wanted a papal title which would put him on a par with the Most Christian King of France and with the Catholic King of Spain, but the Pope was unwilling to oblige. So when Luther revolted against Rome, Henry seized his opportunity and wrote an anti-Lutheran tract called *An Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*, in which he defended traditional Catholic sacramental teaching. In 1521, a grateful Pope Leo X granted Henry his heart's desire, and made him *Fidei Defensor* – Defender of the Faith. But when Henry's ambassadors went to collect the title, they were snubbed by the Pope, who wanted to make it quite clear that it had been extracted from him under pressure!

Probably Henry should have given it up when he made himself Supreme Head of the Church of England in 1534, but he was not that kind of person, and in any case, he continued to persecute Lutherans until the day

he died, thereby remaining faithful to the title's original intention. So far from being a Protestant title which underlines the establishment of the Church of England, *Defender of the Faith* is the exact opposite. Furthermore, it is a personal title granted to the sovereign, which would remain valid (assuming that it is still valid) even if Church and state were to be separated.

While we are on this subject, many people erroneously believe that the monarch is the head of the Church. Henry VIII was, to be sure, but since 1559 the sovereign's official title has been that of Supreme Governor, in recognition of the fact that Christ is the Head of the Church. This may seem like a small point, since it does not affect the way the Church is governed, but it does put limits on what is possible in the realm of doctrine. The state cannot alter the Church's doctrine in a way which goes against the teaching of Christ, nor does it claim the right to do so.

Furthermore, separation of Church and state is quite possible without disestablishment. William the Conqueror achieved it in 1072, and despite some lapses, his settlement remained until Henry VIII reappropriated the Church in 1534. At present, this is the position enjoyed by the Church of Scotland, and *de facto* much of the time by the Church of England as well. The present debate is bedevilled by the fact that few people seem to realize that it is quite possible to remove the Church from Parliamentary control without formally disestablishing it – a solution which, if it were to be implemented in England as it has been in Scotland, would probably be the best one for everybody.

The real link between the monarch and the Church is not in these things, but is symbolized by the royal style *Dei Gratia* (by the grace of God). This little phrase, reduced to *DG* on the coinage, is the true key to the nature of the British monarchy, and it goes back to the baptism of Clovis, King of the Franks, in 496 – 1500 years ago! When he and other barbarian kings became Christians, they renounced the sacral kingship of paganism and accepted the fact that all power derived from the God of the Bible. In practice, this meant that God's ministers, and especially the Pope, were able to confer legitimacy on Christian rulers. This legitimacy was enshrined in the coronation ceremony, which was the form that sacral kingship took in a Christian society. In legal terms, the phrase 'by the grace of God' really means 'with the sanction of the Church', and that implies coronation.

The passage of time has eliminated coronation ceremonies from every European country except one. Only in the United Kingdom does the Church continue to play the role of legitimator, and this is its great power. The abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936 was caused by a number of

factors, but one of them was the reluctance of the Church to crown a man who openly flouted its moral authority. If the present Prince of Wales were to defy the Church by remarrying within the lifetime of his previous partner, or within the lifetime of his future wife's previous partner, then the Church would find it impossible to crown him, and he would be deprived of his legitimacy. An uncrowned king is possible, of course, but would the country accept it? Almost certainly not, because even if we cannot explain why, most of us feel in our bones that a proper coronation is essential for any 'real' king or queen. If the Church were to refuse it on moral grounds, the position of the monarch would be untenable and he would have to abdicate.

This brings us to the last point, which has been much discussed of late. Need the monarch belong to the state Church? This is a curious question, since at the time of the Reformation it was the other way round. When Henry VIII broke with the Pope, all his loyal subjects were expected to follow suit. Similarly, when his daughter Mary went back to Rome, her loyal subjects were expected to go along with her – and most of them actually did. It was only later, once the Reformation settled down, that such mass transfers of allegiance became impossible. At that point, most European countries started to insist that the ruler take on the religion of the people (rather than the other way round) or get out. England's last experience of a sovereign who did not belong to the national Church was James II (1685-1688), and he was soon forced to flee the country.

Since then, it has been the constitutional rule that the King of England will belong to the Church of England, and the King of Scotland to the Church of Scotland. As a result, the Supreme Governor of our Church is a humble communicant in another Church with which we are not even in communion. This seems odd, but as long as neither Church makes exclusive claims for itself, it can (and does) work. Even if it were possible for a future monarch to marry a Catholic (or a Muslim or whatever), for a child of such a marriage to succeed to the throne, he or she would have to be a member of not one, but two national Churches, even though they are to some degree mutually incompatible. Such a person might conceivably belong to a third religious body as well – William III and all the Hanoverian kings from George I to William IV did so, and hardly anybody even noticed – but only if that body does not anathematize either of the other two, or prevent its members from belonging to them. If the Roman Church had been able to accept other Christian bodies as its equals, King William III might have agreed to be a Catholic in Ireland and saved us all a lot of bother later on. But of course, Rome could not have abandoned its exclusive claims without ceasing to be itself, and this is why there can never be a Catholic king in Britain – especially not in a Britain which prides itself on being pluralistic and secular. British Catholics who moan

in the press that they feel 'insulted' by the residual anti-Catholicism of the monarchy ought to be humble enough to admit that if their side had been in charge, the rest of us would long ago have been persecuted into the status of an insignificant minority.

There will doubtless be a lot of debate about the future of our monarchy in the years to come. It has to be said that the opinions and behaviour of the Prince of Wales are often disconcerting for someone who is expected to occupy a hugely important symbolic role in our society. The mere fact that he expresses doubts about this role, and does things which raise people's eyebrows, undermines the institution he is supposedly being trained to serve. He of all people ought to understand that by acting in the way he does, he is subverting the monarchy far more effectively than any republican backbencher in the House of Commons ever could.

The Church of England is our oldest national institution, and it defined England long before there was a national monarchy. It could survive without a king, though probably most Anglicans would not want to have to face that eventuality. But whether the monarchy could survive without the Church is much more doubtful, because for all its faults, the Church provides the moral and spiritual legitimacy on which the sovereign's position rests. The future of the Crown is really bound up with the moral and spiritual destiny of the nation as a whole. We need to get beyond superficial attempts at constitution-making and understand the deep issues which are at stake in the present crisis of national identity. At bottom, the issue boils down to this: if after 1400 years England is no longer a Christian country, has it any right to go on calling itself England?

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