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The Structure of the Church of England

Abstract. How can the Church of England retain its special place in English life? Will the church remain established by law? The Church of England can move forward only after it has answered these important questions, this essay says. Since the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and aside from a brief period in the seventeenth century, the Church of England has always been the state church. Its representatives conduct many solemn public ceremonies especially those connected to military commemorations. The church is often present at royal ceremonies also. It provides chaplains to public institutions such as hospitals and schools. Those people who defend continued church establishment usually acknowledge that only a small minority of English persons attend the Church of England's services on an average Sunday, but these defenders say, the church's tolerance is its special contribution to English life. That tolerance permeates English society, bringing a peaceful tone and good public order. This benefits all, even those of other religions or of none, the defenders say. This argument has merit, but is tolerance enough to support an argument for continued establishment? Based on tolerance, the argument for establishment resembles the case made by Roman writers for the Roman state's establishment of pagan sects. That Roman argument was not compatible with the fervor of Christian believers. Their fervor is still incompatible with some discourse about toleration today. All this makes necessary a fuller discussion of English church establishment. This essay contributes to that fuller discussion.

Key words: Church of England, church organization, Anglicanism, English society in the 21st century

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Устройство англиканской церкви

Аннотация. Как англиканская церковь может сохранить особое место в жизни англичан? Продолжит ли церковь регулироваться законом? По мнению автора статьи, англиканская церковь может продолжить существование только найдя ответы на эти важные вопросы. После Реформации, произошедшей в Англии в XVI в., за исключением короткого периода в XVII в., англиканская церковь всегда была церковью государственной. Её представители проводят многие священные публичные церемонии, особенно на военных торжествах или на церемониях, организованных королевской семьей. Церковь поставляет священников для общественных организаций, таких как больницы и школы. Защитники сохранения существующего церковного устройства обычно признают, что только меньшинство англичан посещает воскресные церковные службы, тем не менее, терпимость церкви – её характерный вклад в английскую жизнь. Эта терпимость пронизывает английское общество, приносит мир и общественный порядок. Это идёт на благо всем, даже тем, кто исповедует другую религию, или не исповедует никакой. В этих рассуждениях есть доля правды, но достаточно ли этого, чтобы оправдать существующее церковное устройство? Будучи основанным на терпимости, этот аргумент напоминает взгляды римских писателей на организацию римским государством языческих сект. Римский взгляд был несовместим с христианским рвением. Это рвение и сегодня несовместимо с современной идеей терпимости. Все это делает необходимым более глубокое обсуждение устройства англиканской церкви, которому посвящена данная статья.

Ключевые слова: англиканская церковь, церковное устройство, англиканизм, английское общество в XXI в.

“This country is dying. Its people are empty inside. They are selfish. They do not love anyone. They do not have children”. These are the words of a taxi driver. This essay will reflect upon the application of these words to the establishment of the Church of England.

Face it. The taxi driver’s words were true and accurate. A Christian sermon should make the points which the taxi driver made. The Bible texts for such a Christian sermon are easy to remember. Think of the words of John the Baptist as recorded by Saint Luke. “O generation of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Or remember the words of Jesus himself as recorded by Saint Matthew. “A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it”.

Gordon Brown spoke of a likelihood that a Scottish referendum could lead to the breakup of the United Kingdom. He called the United Kingdom a failed state. Speaking of failure, Brown himself failed when he was prime minister from 2007 to 2010, but then he became the best previous prime minister who is alive today. Brown is the Jimmy Carter of the United Kingdom. Many voters in Scotland strongly favored continued association with the European Union, and Brown said that these Scottish voters may well favor an end to the union of Scotland with England and Wales [Gordon, 2021].

This essay argues for the preservation of the legal establishment of the Church of England. Although Britain has lost so much of its tradition, and although some people say it is a failed state, yet nevertheless bits of tradition are still strong in Britain. The establishment of the Church of England is one such tradition. The monarchy is another. Both should be preserved.

Here is a summary of the legal position of the Church of England. Remember that the church was established by law as a result of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Act of Uniformity 1558 was especially important in this regard. This establishment by law remains, and also the monarch remains head of the church, sworn to protect it [Documents, 1896, 458–467].

What is the situation today? This text is taken from an article by Joan O’Donovan, one of the leading experts on the subject.

“The monarch is supreme governor of the church, under oath to uphold it: she appoints to senior ecclesiastical posts (on Prime Ministerial nominations originating in a church commission), and has direct jurisdiction over certain churches (“royal peculiars”). All worship on state occasions is that of the Church of England. Twenty-six senior bishops sit in the House of Lords (Lords Spiritual), along with lay hereditary and life peers (Lords Temporal). Church legislation is public law, generated and passed by the church’s internal assembly (General Synod) before obtaining (largely pro forma) parliamentary approval. Church courts, operating under the High Court, have coercive jurisdiction. Committees with government representation oversee the property and finances of the church, which is legally structured as a public network of (corporate and individual) persons and property.

Ecclesiastical law awards some special powers to the church, but many more nation-wide obligations of a pastoral and pedagogical kind, in respect, e.g., of baptism, marriage, burial, and the provision of religious education and chaplaincy services within public institutions” [O’Donovan, 2011, 17–18].

Having defined church legal establishment as it exists today, Joan O’Donovan then made a case for its benefits. As the established church, the Church of England promotes a liberal atmosphere, she said. For instance, the Church of England promoted social reform and social justice during centuries past. It urged the abolition of slavery and of the slave trade, and its advocacy for social justice continues, she went on to say. That liberal atmosphere has a wide reach because the Church of England cooperates with other religious groups in England, and many of them for that reason now support continued establishment of the Church of England. The official presence of the established English Christian church in national life assures a representation of religious views at the highest levels of government.

Since O’Donovan is an expert, her case for establishment of the Church of England is probably the standard case. Because the establishment of the church is by act of parliament, as it was in 1558, therefore the standard case for it is a dry one and a legal one. Such language is usual and appropriate in legislation to recite calculations similar to

those in O'Donovan's article. It is legalistic and political language. It is the language of statute. The same sort of dry calculations go into a commercial contract or a business deal [Cambridge Uni, 2019].

Yes, the establishment of the Church of England is valuable, and yes it should be continued. No doubt Joan O'Donovan advocacy for its continued establishment is the main and current case. She was persuasive for many people, and, for that reason, her article should be read carefully.

O'Donovan's arguments for church establishment are sound, but her arguments about it are also partial. Additional arguments for its religious establishment are needed. Therefore, this essay supplements O'Donovan's argument.

Here are arguments about how the Church of England can make a fuller and more nearly complete case for its continued legal establishment.

First, here is an argument which analogous to that made by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He suffered a martyr's death at the hands of the Nazis. As a Christian and a martyr, it was given to him to foresee the condition of Christianity in Europe after the war. Bonhoeffer anticipated the decline of Christianity in Europe. Grace had become, to use his words, "low cost". Grace became cheap [Bonhoeffer, 1959, 46].

English Christianity is in decline. The phrase "cheap grace" well describes the public version of the Christian religion which is offered to all comers in England by the state church. By contrast, by the phrase "expensive grace" Bonhoeffer meant grace which involved the personal experience of God. Only a few people experience expensive grace, but an authentic church must revere and protect those who do experience it. Bonhoeffer thought the medieval church had done so by rejecting calls for monasticism to be judged heretical.

To counter the charge that the Church of England offers only cheap grace, the church must simultaneously offer cheap grace to all comers, yet the church must also offer expensive grace to its core adherents. The enthusiasm and energy which go along with expensive grace will legitimize and strengthen the dry legal case for church establishment.

If you read Joan O'Donovan's official case for church establishment, you should read Bonhoeffer. You should then also read and follow ancient Greek and Roman historians. They made an excellent case for established religion. They said that Rome's official pagan religions and Rome's toleration of various other religions were wise policies. Religion and toleration were the nurses of its civil peace.

The Greek historian Polybius was an especially wise exponent of the political benefits which Rome enjoyed by reason of Rome's tolerance combined with its religious establishment. Polybius was a Greek who was sent as a hostage to Rome when the Romans conquered Greece. You may also follow his nineteenth-century commentator, the German historian Theodore Mommsen. Mommsen was the greatest nineteenth-century German historian of the Roman world. Mommsen gave an especially valuable commentary on official religious establishment. It was in a summary of Polybius as seen by Mommsen. These arguments remain valid and should be used to parallel and to supplement O'Donovan's article about the liberal tolerance of the Church of England.

Successful government, said both Polybius and Mommsen, requires the sacrifice of private interest for public good. Soldiers must be willing to die in battle, for instance. Without their bravery, the state cannot survive. Religion enables government to justify its demand for such terrible sacrifice. Without religion, society dissolves into a collection of self-interested and quarrelsome individuals. Polybius thought this was what had happened to the Greeks. Political unity and military bravery were, aside from tyche or destiny, the causes of Roman victory, said Polybius¹. Individually, one by one, many Greeks were more urbane and more sophisticated than most Romans, he thought, but the Greeks were unable to unite themselves. Even within the Greek cities, people quarreled to the point of civil war, and Greek cities were never able to unite themselves into a Greek nation. They had cultural unity but no political unity. On the other hand, the Romans were united. The Romans also gave their citizenship to many other people, first Italians and then to other free people outside Italy, drawing them all into the fold of Roman unity. Roman soldiers were famous for discipline and bravery. They were prepared for sacrifice [Polybius 2014; Mommsen, 2018].

This is all Polybius and Mommsen, mind you. More. Most Roman soldiers were simple country laborers, rude farmers with little knowledge of city life, as Polybius and

Mommsen both said. These soldiers believed in the gods of the state, and these soldiers were afraid that any selfish action of theirs – such as cowardice in battle – might anger the gods. Because they feared the gods, these simple and rustic soldiers made better troops than any of those troops available to the urbane and sophisticated Greeks.

Mommsen argued that questions about the existence of God were for philosophers, not for politicians or historians. Whether any god exists was therefore an open question, and governments might as well let it remain open, he and Polybius both said. Whether state patronage of religion was essential to the well-being and success of society was on the other hand not an open question. The usefulness of established religion was a proven fact. Society was secure and successful only when it has its basis in self-sacrifice, and religious belief was the best and most secure foundation of self-sacrifice. Government might therefore safely tolerate diversity of private belief, but government must uphold public religious practice in principle, and government must above all uphold and maintain the public practice of authentic religious ritual.

You should read Polybius and Mommsen. The books are free or nearly free downloads on the Internet. If you do not want to read Polybius and Mommsen, but if you are willing to read something less scholarly, then you can find some of the same Roman material in *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*. It is a brilliant 1895 novel by the Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, winner of the Nobel Prize. The protagonist in *Quo Vadis* was a fictional patrician soldier, but otherwise the book was a careful account based on authentic Roman writers [Sienkiewicz, 2016].

This important novel is especially valuable for a discussion of church establishment because of the depiction in the novel of Petronius Arbiter, an actual historical figure of the imperial court. From him and from the pagan characters in *Quo Vadis*, you can see that Romans considered themselves the most tolerant people in the ancient world. The Roman state patronized all the different religions which it encountered, seeking to merge them into an amalgam. Christianity was a problem for the Roman state only because Christians would not accept inclusion in the amalgam. Christians wished to stand alone, and they condemned pagan worship as demonic. You will find in the fictional Petronius a model for many current British intellectuals, sophisticated, selfish, polite, without any substantial belief in anything, serving a state which they see to be entirely corrupt and incapable of reform. The young fictional patrician protagonist in the novel was a very brave soldier who had at first no doubt of the value of state religion, and like his friend Petronius in the novel also had no personal belief in any god, yet he supported the necessity for state patronage of all pagan religions.

The plot of the novel was simple. Although he had no personal belief in Christ, the fictional patrician fell in love with a fictional Christian princess, and in the novel Petronius reflected philosophically on the differing advantages of the two systems of religious belief. Through his experience with Christians, Petronius in the novel came to understand the power of belief in a personal God. In Bonhoeffer's terms, the patrician at first experienced cheap grace and then finally understood the power of expensive grace. He underwent Christian conversion. It is a very good novel. Give it a try.

If you read *Quo Vadis*, and if you also remember the taxi driver, then you will understand both the strength and yet the incompleteness of O'Donovan's proposed use of church establishment to promote a liberal and tolerant atmosphere. Does she mean that something similar to the Roman amalgam should exist in Britain? If so, the business of the Church of England would consist of the proper performance of ritual. That was the job which pagan religions performed for the Roman state. Established religious worship amid tolerance religious diversity were standard official policies in the Roman world.

Christianity is invaluable because it is valid and authentic, however few are those who experience the fullness of its grace. The business of the Church of England must be to offer both cheap grace for the many and also expensive grace for those few who need it and want it. Expensive grace, however few the number of those who experience it, will make the state church a living church. The letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

If you think carefully about these views, whether from Polybius and Theodore Mommsen, or from the Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or from Henryk Sienkiewicz, or from the taxi driver who was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, then you will realize that views

such as theirs might well be incorporated into current arguments about English church establishment – and about the monarch as head of the Church of England.

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¹ In the works of Polybius search for “fortune” and “destiny” which are the English words used to translate “ty-che.”

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