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COMMENT

Church Buildings: Blessing or Burden?

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Keywords: church buildings, sacred space, heritage, national identity

It is a privilege to have been invited to deliver the Boydell Lecture and to record my own appreciation of Peter, whom I can picture now – immaculate and affable as always. He was very kind to me as a fledgling Bishop of London. There was at the time an understandable debate about whether the tradition of inviting the bishop to be an honorary bencher of the Middle Temple should be continued. Time pressures had made the connection of some previous bishops very tenuous. Peter argued that +Londin should be given a last chance and this has led as far as I am concerned to a most nourishing and instructive relationship with the Temple and those who work here. As you know, by the Queen's command I do not appear in the Temple Church as bishop but as Dean of HM Chapels Royal and the Visitor, and I relish my connection with a place which preserves memories of so many events which have shaped our nation, as well as a living choral tradition which must be among the finest in the land.

My theme, appropriately enough, is 'Church buildings: blessing or burden?' There are some people, as we shall hear, who see things in this black-and-white way and for whom it would be a great blessing if we were able to hand over our ancient buildings to the state as a preliminary to worshipping in tents or some secular venue, as befits a pilgrim people. That is not my position. Church buildings, I shall argue, are a blessing to the Christian community and to the whole of society but they are also a responsibility and even a burden which falls disproportionately on the worshippers of this generation.

1 This is the text of the 2015 Boydell Lecture, sponsored by Taylor Francis Building, was delivered in Inner Temple Hall on 20 May 2015. A biographical note about Peter Boydell QC, in whose memory the annual lecture was inaugurated, appears on p 331.

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PARISHES AND PARISH CHURCHES

The UK ceased to be a confessional state in 1829 and thereafter successive governments have been committed to a free market in religious ideas. Frequently, however, where public policy and the aspirations of the communities of faith coincide, partnerships in achieving general social goals are possible. The parish churches of England offer special opportunities because of their distinct legal position. Parishioners who are not worshippers have legal rights to service from the parish church – for example, the right to be married. The election of churchwardens by voters qualified by residence and not necessarily members of the congregation is another aspect of a relationship with the whole of a local community which is enshrined in law.

There are about 16,000 parish churches, which constitute a countrywide network that endures in the inner city and rural areas where places of public assembly and service are in short and often diminishing supply. There are now more parish churches than post offices – and indeed there are already more than a score of post offices which operate from church buildings.

One of the latest examples is the Sherriff Centre in St James, West Hampstead, which combines a number of services for the local community, including a post office and a children's play area. There was opposition not from church people but from secularists anxious about vital services being located in a building with such a clear religious identity. This is an example of a growing trend to return church buildings to their original function as places of worship and also places of assembly and celebration for the whole of the local community. This ancient tradition has in more recent centuries often been overlaid by distaste for mixing the sacred and secular but this dichotomy is increasingly being challenged.

Further encouragement from Government and from regional authorities via the planning process would be a powerful incentive for the individual parochial church councils to enhance the usefulness of their churches as community hubs with appropriate modern facilities such as kitchens and lavatories.

FUNDING ISSUES

At a time of financial stringency, when the green agenda is growing in significance, it obviously makes sense to maintain and develop such a significant national asset. It would cost billions to replicate the countrywide social infrastructure which already exists in the network of buildings that the Church of England manages on behalf of the whole community. Any assistance would, of course, depend on a proven determination to equip the churches for wider community access, but a relatively modest investment could yield large dividends.

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Among its more than 16,000 churches, the Church of England is responsible for 45 per cent of all grade I listed buildings in the country. Historic England estimates that the required spend on the repair and maintenance of church buildings is in the region of £175 million per annum. An astonishing £115 million is raised by local communities and the whole enterprise depends on the noble army of volunteers. There is, however, an annual £60 million funding gap, even taking into account the Listed Places of Worship Scheme, which effectively enables parochial church councils to reclaim the VAT on repairs and maintenance.

The scheme, first introduced by Gordon Brown and expanded by George Osborne, has been a huge help and encouragement in circumstances where the unique English inheritance of church buildings and the treasury of vernacular art which they constitute does not enjoy the same level of public funding as, say, the ecclesiastical estate in France. In that country, as a result of the 1904 legislation separating Church and State, public authorities at various levels are responsible for the upkeep of all ecclesiastical buildings. The Recteur and Chapter of Chartres Cathedral directly employ a couple of vergers. In contrast, the works staff of St Paul's is 150 and the Cathedral requires £5 million a year to keep the doors open to receive more than a million visitors and pilgrims every year. Unlike the Railway Museum in York, the Minster in the same city enjoys no regular grant from the public purse.

In England over the years, for political reasons, regular sources of public funding have been withdrawn. The Church Rate was abolished under pressure from nonconformists, who understandably objected to this subsidy for the established Church, but as a result there is no mechanism like church tax in Germany, which allows sympathisers who are not regular worshippers to support the fabric of the church. It might be worth investigating the possibility of a scheme for a voluntary church rate.

Recent budgets have included special grants for cathedrals and what George Osborne has called a grant for parish churches to 'mend the roof while the sun is shining'. This is very welcome and Mr Osborne has been especially generous partly because his constituency experience provides evidence of the social value of the activities which have churches as their base. Most politicians can speak about individual churches which make significant contributions to local society. Often, however, partly because the church has not always been good at communicating its own story, they do not appreciate the potential of the network as a whole.

In recent years the necessary advocacy has greatly improved, with Janet Gough and her team from the Church Buildings Division offering leadership and practical assistance. Anyone who wants to investigate this subject further should Google the 'Church Care' website. The recently retired MP for Banbury, Sir Tony Baldry, has just become Chairman of the Church Buildings

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Council. His energy and impact as Second Church Estates Commissioner in securing Government support is an encouraging sign of what he might achieve in his new role.

The financial shortfall is, however, still considerable and the burden on heroic but often venerable volunteers in some parts of the country seems increasingly unsustainable. This context needs to be understood as we seek to improve the policy framework. One example is in the use of new materials which those who built our churches in the first place might well have used if they had been available. This is a problem which affects all those who are responsible for historic buildings.

The large number of grade I rural churches is a special challenge. The Diocese of Norwich contains 150 parishes with a population of less than 150. A Diocesan Trust for Churches has recently been established to care for churches with insufficient community support, using the maintenance and conservation services which the diocese has already developed. The philosophy is that we cannot accurately predict patterns of population and needs in the future. We need some mechanism for coping with immediate challenges which does not lead to the dismal spectacle visible in some parts of London of so-called redundant churches which have been converted to other uses and which in many cases present a sad and dilapidated appearance at a time when we are searching for places in which to plant new congregations.

CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

All this represents just a fraction of the pragmatic thinking and planning which is being applied to alleviate the burden of church buildings on worshippers in this generation, but what about the 'blessing' in my title? I suppose that the poet Philip Larkin, author of the poem 'Church Going', would have described himself as an agnostic, but his final stanza has more spiritual gravitas than many a pious paperback:

> A serious house on serious earth it is,
> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
> Are recognised and robed as destinies.
> And that much never can be obsolete,
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious,
> And gravitating with it to this ground,
> Which he once heard was proper to grow wise in
> If only that so many dead lie round.[2]

2 P Larkin, 'Church Going' in A Burnett (ed), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin* (London, 2012).

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The elegiac note in the poem reflects the common assumption of the day before yesterday that the sea of faith was ebbing and that the community of active worshippers was dwindling. This is still true in many places. I was sitting on a bus in Somerset and overheard a fellow passenger say, 'The last Methodist is dying in Upton Noble.' Some church people have internalised the common assumption that the story of God can only have one end – relegation to the leisure sector. I remember looking round one rather decrepit building with a churchwarden who said rather sadly, 'You know, Bish, I think it's only inertia that keeps us going.'

Larkin famously identified 1963 as the watershed year when 'sexual intercourse was invented'. Churchill's Britain crumbled with bewildering rapidity and the Church which had been in many ways at home in Churchill's Britain fell prey to angst and confusion about its task and identity. It seemed that this was just the closing act of a drama which Matthew Arnold had seen unfolding on Dover beach in the 1850s. In a melancholy fit, staying in a Dover lodging house just after his marriage, Arnold pictured the sea of faith 'retreating to the breath of the night wind, down the vast edges drear and naked shingles of the world'. The tide was going out. Europeans became convinced that modernisation would proceed hand in hand with secularisation and that what had begun to happen in our part of the continent of Europe was setting a pattern which would be followed by the rest of the world. In England, where to call someone an intellectual has had the potential to wreck a political career, the full realisation of this process was long in coming. The mini religious revival of the 1950s for a time obscured what was happening (and incidentally misled some church leaders into thinking what was a blip was in fact the norm) but by the sixties and seventies even we were beginning to see the writing on the wall of our church buildings. Larkin in his poem wondered

> When churches fall completely out of use
> What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
> A few cathedrals chronically on show
> ...
> I wonder who
> Will be the last, the very last, to seek
> This place for what it was ...[3]

The tide was going out but perhaps unnaturally far, and such a dramatic recession is one of the signs of an approaching tsunami. In a cosmopolitan place such as London, 'a world in a city', there are many signs of increasing turbulence and of the spiritual tsunami that has built up among the very youthful population of the world in places like the vast housing projects in greater Cairo and in the megalopolises of South America. Ken Livingstone, not an uncritical admirer of our

3 Larkin, 'Church Going'.

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holy faith said to me that as he toured London two things were obvious – the population was still growing and 'It's a more religious place'.

Mark Thompson, the former Director General of the BBC, made a similar point in his address on 'Faith and the Media' in Westminster Cathedral. Reflecting on his 20 years in television he traced the collapse of the consensus that Nietzsche was right – there had been an *Entzauberung*, a breaking of the spell in western European civilisation. Falling church rolls and innumerable sociological studies were seen when he began his broadcasting career as irrefutable signs of the imminence of God's funeral. Now the comfortable consensus that the story of religion could only end in retreat and fragmentation in the face of modernity has evaporated.

In a way that bewilders members of yesterday's Anglo-American avant-garde, it is already clear that the four to five billion people in the world who follow some kind of spiritual path are not going to conform to what until recently was seen to be the inevitable consequence of modernisation – that is, the relegation of religion to the margins of life.

Exceptionally in north-western Europe this is what has happened and this is what Arnold saw on Dover beach. The resulting lack of seriousness about the quality of our spiritual education has, of course, resulted among other things in a new credulity among people who have few defences against the peddlers of the cults of unreason.

There was an amusing example reported some years ago by *The Economist*. The astrology correspondent on one of the tabloids failed to turn up one morning to cast his horoscopes so a rather cynical senior hack was pressed into service. Somewhat bored with his task he decided to spice things up and wrote under the sign of Cancer this prediction: 'All the ills of yesteryear will be as nothing to what will befall you today'. He thought that it was harmless fun but the switchboard was jammed with panicking readers and he was sacked. But it is another sign of a sea change that the editorial team at *The Economist* has since 9/11 decided that the reality of the contemporary world cannot be described without reporting its religious news. Five years ago, ink would not have been wasted on something which was seen to have no value in understanding the daylight world. They even published an obituary of God in the millennium issue but now, after the publication of the book by the recently departed editor John Micklethwaite, *God is Back*, hardly an issue goes by without some serious reporting of religion.

We do not live in a country that can be simply described as secular. On the other hand, we do not inhabit a religious country and still less can we be described as a Christian country, although every single week in the Greater London area there are 630,000 Christians assembling for worship in more than 4,000 churches. If that were true of any political party we would regard it as a non-trivial fact. The truth is that London is secular, religious and

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Christian all at the same time and this will become increasingly true of the whole of the UK.

If we are to bequeath a creative culture and good country in which to live, then conversation between these different perspectives on life has to be sustained and deepened. If we are not in respectful and strenuous conversation, then there will be more destructive conflict. Churches are assembly points with a convening power – as I saw in the run-up to the recent general election in numerous gatherings to interrogate candidates about the common good. Churches have a role in proclaiming and demonstrating the Christian faith but they also have a role – as they showed in East Germany before the fall of the Wall – in assembling unlike people and promoting creative conversation.

Some people, of course, like the fundamentalist secularists (whose shrillness is yet another sign of approaching spiritual turbulence), want to close down the conversation by asserting that there is only one valid way of looking at life. This is the high road to conflict and to the exclusion of the voices of faith from the public square in a way that radicalises them as they speak words of fire among consenting adults in arenas where they are not exposed to rational debate. Every child deserves an education for the twenty-first century which includes religious literacy, ethical clarity and spiritual awareness. Every church should recognise the duty and the opportunity to assist in this kind of education.

CHRISTIANITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

It is time for the sleeping giant of the Church of England to recover a non-exclusive confidence in our place in the future of our country, as well as in our past. At a time when the choice is between conversation and the kind of ghettoisation which leads to conflict, we should rejoice in the presence of churches which have aspired to serve the whole community and not just the pious and observant part of it. I can think of a host of good examples, like St James, Piccadilly, under the leadership of Lucy Winkett.

Extinction is one of the subterranean themes of our time. It may be why people are so fascinated by dinosaurs. The extinction of species and the loss of biodiversity is certainly one of the challenges we shall face in the twenty-first century.

On a visit to Berlin as part of our link with the Diocese of Berlin Brandenburg, I was shown the private meditation room used by German members of the Reichstag. The walls are hung with six oblong panels. The first is simply earth-coloured with protuberant flints. In the second panel there is a scattering of white-painted nails on the same background. It was explained to us that the nails were the first human beings. By the third panel the nails had been arranged in the pattern of religious symbols – crescent, cross, star and the like. By the fourth panel the nails covered the entire surface. By the fifth something had happened and the nails had receded and formed one or two scattered groups. In the

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sixth panel the earth and the protuberant flints had reasserted their dominance, but if you looked carefully you could see a stratum within the flints of fossilised nails. The series is crying out for a seventh panel – new creation, resurrection – but it is missing.

Let us come closer to home. My great predecessor at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mandell Creighton, devoted many of his addresses to the vocation of the 'national church'. That was before he was worried to death by ritualists. It is not a description of our church I hear very frequently now and it right that we have moved on to thinking in pan-Christian rather than in denominational terms. Indeed, one of the things becoming obvious to me as I travel around is the post-denominational character of much Christianity in this world in a city – London. But the role of the Church of England in this context has a new salience. We can be inspired by the vision of a church without a sectarian gene that is determined to embrace all those who live in the parish and this England, irrespective of whether or not they are electoral roll members.

The Government clearly sees national identity as problematical – hence the emphasis on so-called British values. On examination, however, the concepts which are said to convey British values – various synonyms for tolerance and fairness detached from any specific narrative context – do not seem to be especially British. Speaking as a veteran of trying to compose citizenship courses for schools, I have discovered that simply invoking abstract universals does not generate one iota of the energy which is needed to transform the lives of individuals and societies. This is perturbing as we reflect on recent events. My Sunday duties took me recently to the parish where Muhammad Emwazi alias Jihadi John lived as a school boy. The topic of schools and religion was hotly debated and one teacher said, 'We leave religion at the school gates.'

I was sympathetic, in view of the crimes committed in the name of religion, but every educational regime is based on certain assumptions about the nature of human beings and what is worthwhile about life. There is no such thing as secular neutrality – one of the most implausible myths around. Many schools are based on the assumption that the economy is the only game in town and fitting young people to be productive units in the economy is the supreme task. You cannot exorcise the satanic by creating a vacuum, and indeed religion cannot be stopped at the school gates because it enters for good or sometimes for ill with the students.

And there are two surprising truths which must be born in mind. Everyone worships. Of course I know that there are people who put 'atheist' on their census returns but it is only human to shape our future and ourselves by reference to something attractive or fearsome to which we ascribe worth. Most often these days that something is an idea – wealth, power, glamour. The Greeks clothed these ideas in human form: Hercules and Aphrodite. Now projections are onto celebrities and their lifestyles.

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In some cases this universal disposition to worship takes a more sinister form. Idolatry, constantly denounced by all the prophets, is making gods in our own image – projecting some part of ourselves and naming it god. Typically, the bruised and humiliated ego surreptitiously re-ascends by projecting its own rage and lust for power. This is serious because of a second surprising fact of the spiritual life. Certain prayer is always answered. You turn into the god you worship. The money-grabbers and those who are generous grow into what they worship.

Our identity as a people has been decisively shaped by a particular tradition of worship which re-members the words and the gestures of Jesus Christ on his way to the cross and the example of self-giving love. His story has been able to knit together Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. There are other narratives in circulation accessible to one another in a way unparalleled in history. Who knows what a fusion of horizons will bring but one thing is certain: that societies must have moral and mythic glue to help them cohere. Hence the emphasis on British values.

We are a diverse society in need of unifying stories; and the Christian community, as a responsible part of society as a whole, is called in our own time to practise the language Christ taught us and to assemble to re-member his story – not in the weak sense that we remember an event of long ago and far away but to be fed by him and to re-member his body in the present. Too many people seem to be intent on dismembering. If we continue in this way, then we shall mince ourselves into atoms and our part of the language of God will be lost. The words of Christ can never be destroyed, nor the community in which they are spoken, but the church in particular places can lose the capacity to speak the language in a convincing way, whether in word or deed or stone.

CHURCH BUILDINGS AND SACRED SPACE

I was brought up at a time when churches were described opprobriously as 'plant'. My predecessor as a parish priest in Westminster wanted to abandon the church building to worship in tents as befits a pilgrim people. (There is a place for tents and I have established one myself in Bishopsgate as a focus for interfaith encounter, but that is another story.) There was in those far-off days enthusiasm for the abolition of sanctuary screens and the multi-purpose worship space was in vogue. It was clearly inefficient to set aside a dedicated space to represent a next-worldly dimension. We were told to admire churches that doubled as basketball courts. Altars had to be dragged out of their position in the east and placed in the midst and the Christian community was taught to prefer the introverted life of gathering around the table to the traditional procession into the new dimension of the kingdom.

I believe that this has led to a sense of the real absence of the infinite possibilities of heaven, and a profound disorientation. The sanctuary has been

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evacuated and the blood supply to the symbolic life has been cut. In consequence, as the poet Robert Lowell puts it,

> In this small town where everything
> is known, I see His vanishing
> emblems, His white spire and flag-
> pole sticking out above the fog,
> Like old white china doorknobs, sad,
> Slight, useless things to calm the mad.[4]

We need to return to fundamenta. The scientific understanding of space as infinite expanse with no centre has little connection with living in a meaningful world. Human beings have never actually lived in the space conceived by mathematicians as isotropic, having the same properties in all directions. The space experienced by human beings is oriented.

Space is not homogeneous for the person who is spiritually aware. Such a person experiences manifestations like Moses in Exodus 3. God called to him out of the bush and said, 'Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' Sacred space is a revelation of what is real in the midst of the formless expanse. It reveals the fixed point, the pole, the central axis for orientation. In doing so it permits a cosmos, an ordered world, to be constituted. In profane space there is no fixed point and no true orientation. There is no possibility of a cosmos – only the fragments of one, like the debris of a stellar explosion.

A universe comes to birth from its centre. In the Christian narrative Jesus Christ was crucified at Golgotha, the place of the skull. Whose skull? The skull was that of the first human being, Adam, made from the dust of the earth. The lifting up of Christ on a tree in this central place in the history of human life provides the vertical axis to which the new humanity is drawn: 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life' (John 3:14–15).

The new axis stands on a table, the mensa mystica around which the new people is assembled and nourished. The Christian sanctuary then has a central vertical axis, an orientation towards the east (the next-worldly dimension of the divine kingdom) and a horizontal invitation, a space within which the new humanity is assembled and nourished. But the truth of the sanctuary must be balanced by the warmth of the invitation to come in and since so many who have been invited like the guests to the wedding feast in the gospel are too busy to come, we have to go out into the highways and the hedgerows with our invitation.

4 R Lowell, 'Waking Early Sunday Morning' in F Bidart and D Gewanter (eds), *The Collected Poems of Robert Lowell* (London, 2003).

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I hope that I have said enough to make it clear that I would not be a party to secularising our buildings in any way but we should not be afraid to return to the tradition of earlier centuries and use the nave to embrace all human life. The building itself can set a context for our activities which opens up their depth. I have not been anxious to rationalise our church buildings in London, still less to alienate them or treat them as a problem, because I believe that there are great Christian centuries to come.

Peter Boydell QC was the Head of Chambers for more than 30 years of what is now Francis Taylor Building. He was appointed chancellor successively of the dioceses of Truro (1957), Oxford (1958) and Worcester (1959). He retired from Truro and Worcester when he ceased practice at the bar in 1997 but remained Chancellor of Oxford at the time of his death in February 2001 at the age of 80. Like the Bishop of London he was a Bencher of the Middle Temple and was elected its treasurer for 1989. The Boydell Lecture was instituted in his memory by his former chambers in 2008.

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Marriage in the Church of England: The Immigration Act 2014 and Beyond?

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INTRODUCTION

The background to the passing of the Immigration Act is generally well known and it is recognised that the present Government has had concerns – either of its own or pressed upon it – about levels of immigration in this country. It is clear that all political parties are under some pressure to respond to public concerns over this area, which will clearly be one of the major issues in the campaigns leading up to the forthcoming general election.

1 This comment is based on the text of a lecture of the same title given as part of the Ecclesiastical Law Society's London lecture series on 27 January 2015.

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