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Establishment: Some Theological Considerations

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Liberal modernity and its associated individualism have created conditions in which a case for an established Church appears to contradict all the principles of social diversity. But the characteristic mechanisms of liberal modernity for managing difference – the ballot and the market – have proved inadequate to prevent social divisions from deepening, as the national argument about Brexit demonstrates. Despite the Church of England's lack of a confident narrative of establishment and the tendency to evaluate establishment on pragmatic grounds, this article proposes that a robust theological defence of establishment can be made in terms of both Anglican ecclesiology and a theology of power and authority in which the highest sources of authority are those with the least power. Whether the Church of England is able to regain confidence in such a theology of establishment and rise to the challenge of generating a unifying national narrative of identity post-Brexit, is left as an open question.

Keywords: establishment, liberal modernity, theology of place, theology of power, authority, Brexit

A few years ago, Lambeth Palace received a cry for help from the National Theatre. The theatre was reviving a play, originally written in the 1900s and rewritten in the 1920s, by Harley Granville Barker, entitled *Waste*. It is a tale of the tension between personal and political morality – but the plot turns on a disestablishment Bill, and the director wanted help in understanding what disestablishment was all about, and why it had been a live issue in the first quarter of the last century. By a circuitous route the letter fell onto my desk, and I found myself in a rehearsal room on the South Bank, with the cast and crew, discussing Constantine, the Elizabethan Settlement and Lloyd George, because it was clear from the script that the second version of the play had been written in the light of the disestablishment of the Church in Wales and the history of that process. As a reward for this, and for answering numerous later queries ('What on earth is this line in the script about?'; 'How much was the Church of England worth in 1920?'), my rewards were an invitation to the first night party and the knowledge that I had appeared on stage at the National Theatre. The envelope in which the draft Bill was passed between two characters had contained, just in case it had fallen open, all the emails that had passed between me and the director.

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(DIS)ESTABLISHMENT YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The learning I took away from that incident was, first, that the Welsh experience simply did not translate as a model which could have disestablished the Church of England (if nothing else, the lack of a non-conformist majority in England would have changed the rationale and, if part of the motive in Wales was liberation from the English, it would have been strange for the English to have sought liberation from themselves) and, secondly, that disestablishment is often an idea founded on deeply questionable assumptions. The proponent of disestablishment in the play is a single-minded rationalist, contemptuous of social mores and codes of group conduct. He cannot even cope with the loyalties required by party membership – he is an independent brought into a weak government to shore it up – and it is his coldly rational treatment of his pregnant, married, mistress that leads to her death and his disgrace. In the end, he makes the frigid calculation that political failure has removed his reason for existence and commits suicide. (The play is not a comedy.) As the title, *Waste*, indicates, he is an attractive chancer who ultimately disappoints. Significantly, he wants to reallocate the wealth of the Church of England to support a programme of utilitarian education that will, ultimately, free Britain's youth from the twilight of tradition and religion. The play is open to a number of interpretations but, for me, it exposed the challenge that Christian theology faces at the hands of liberal modernism and its associated rationalism.

The Church of England's attitude to establishment today

It may seem somewhat odd to be talking about theological arguments for an established Church, since the whole concept is so particular to the English context that it seems hard to see it as embodying any universal truth about God. And yet I do want to argue that there is a case to be made for an English model of establishment on the grounds that it captures some important truths about what a good society might look like – and that such a social analysis draws in turn on a distinctively Christian understanding of community and power. I offer these thoughts as a proposal for further reflection, and certainly not as a finished 'theology of establishment'.

Even at the heart of the Church of England today, there is a distinctly apologetic note to any mention of establishment. There has, for example, been no really stalwart defence of the Lords Spiritual when reform of the Upper Chamber has been on the agenda. It has been pointed out that bishops in Parliament are not a new and unnatural concession to religion but that they have been present in Parliament since parliaments began. But history is not felt to carry much clout in a debate which treats 'modern' as a term of unambiguous approbation. A defence of the Lords Spiritual has sometimes been pragmatic: they bring local and regional insights to an overly metropolitan

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chamber. However, it is conceded that there are many ways to skin that particular cat. The regional connectedness is, of course, an outworking of the Church of England's commitment to be 'a Christian presence in every community'. But the Church's vocation to be present for all is not often seen as central to its established status – although I believe it to be fundamental. Instead, we seem to have largely taken at face value the insistence by our critics that establishment is primarily about power and privilege rather than service. I am going to come back to the way that this essentially secular understanding confuses the way in which power and service are related. But I note this generally apologetic attitude in the Church to establishment, characterised, perhaps, as the view that, 'if we were inventing the church for today, we wouldn't be starting from here – and establishment wouldn't feature in our plans'.

Yet, if the Church of England really does believe in its mission to work for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, it is not quite enough to focus only on mission as bringing people into the safety of the Church as a kind of ark, or treating the Church simply as a harbinger of heaven. The disciples we are so keen to nurture have deep and complex lives outside the Christian community, and the Incarnation means that the state of the society in which the Church is embedded matters to God and that the pursuit in that society of the common good is integral to mission. So, in the constant tension in the Church between mission and purity, establishment operates as a counterbalance to introspection.

It has also to be noted, in passing, that the apologetic voice within the Church is counterbalanced by a much more aggressive stance, especially among some in the evangelical tradition, for whom establishment is a cause of theological offence. I recall an impassioned argument, some years ago in a Cambridge pub, with my good friend Jonathan Chaplin, then of the Kirby Laing Institute, where he argued vigorously that having a hereditary monarch as head of the Church was an outrage against biblical principles. I want to argue later than, on the contrary, it embodies something quite clearly aligned with a biblically based ethic. But, for now, I just acknowledge the principled evangelical objections to establishment, and note that there remains room for a robust defence of establishment on theological and philosophical grounds.

Where Jonathan and I would agree is that the dominant mindsets of liberal modernity are deeply flawed. Where we differ is in our approach to the role of the Church in pointing up those deficiencies and offering an attractive countervailing understanding of society, human relationships and so on. But embarrassed and apologetic attitudes to establishment seem to me to stem from a tacit acceptance of a liberal and modernist set of assumptions about balancing identity and plurality, national, local and global belonging, and so on. This is not surprising because such attitudes are what most of us have grown up with and they have been accepted as unquestionable truths for a very long time.

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LIBERAL MODERNITY

At this point it is incumbent on me to say what I mean by liberal modernity. We can best see it as an aspect of the Enlightenment project, which sought to transcend the particularity of culture, tradition and community through elevating human rationality – which, it claimed, we all have in common – as the medium for agreement on vexed questions like 'justice' and 'value'. Out of this flowed essentially abstract institutions such as the market or the ballot as mechanisms for adjudicating between different understandings of value or morality in a complex society where no single narrative of who we were or what constituted 'the good' was accepted by all. The point of such mechanisms was that they purport to be morally neutral – and equally accessible to all traditions and all cultures: to be, in effect, institutions from nowhere and thus above the fray of moral disagreement. Furthermore, while such mechanisms were, for many years, moderated by the political predominance of the nation-state, their claims always stretched beyond any such borders. If human reason was truly universal, then national variants on the institutions that embodied that universality could only be marginal and probably temporary. So we have seen that the market, in particular, and globalisation understood as an essentially economic force have greatly weakened the distinctiveness of national cultures and the effectiveness of national governments. And, although much less successful in achieving such dominance, the claims of a ballot-box-focused democracy as a universal solution to intractable difficulties surely reached its apotheosis under the Blair regime in its approach to foreign affairs and liberal interventionism.

Modernity's view of religion

This is, of course, an excessively compressed account of a dominant worldview, but one which I hope is recognisable. But now consider how something like establishment looks from such a viewpoint. In such a world, everything that does not lend itself to resolution through the democratic vote or the marketplace is accorded some sort of secondary, essentially private, status – and religion clearly falls into that category. Religious difference cannot be resolved through a show of hands or through market forces, so locating anything pertaining to religion in a close relationship to common structures becomes suspect. And yet, the refusal of religion to bow the knee to the market and the poll does not allow it to escape from their clutches. In a society where the poll and the market are the key arbiters of value, the divisions between religions become their only interesting feature. Since the dominant tropes of the poll and the market depend upon competition between ideas or products, religious affiliation must be understood as essentially competitive. In such a competitive framework, it is a massive transgression to treat one religious tradition differently

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from any other, especially where the difference of treatment is associated with access to power, whether that access is real or imagined.

All religion is something of an affront to liberal modernity because of its annoying habit of basing ethics on narrative rather than abstract rationality. Religious affiliation locates every adherent within an overarching story through which their identity is framed and formed. It is the antithesis of the 'person from nowhere' who is the foundational character in liberal modernity representing abstract reason, *homo economicus* (who epitomises rational choice theory in the market place) or the anonymous cross on a ballot paper. The existence of an established Church affirms that there is a particular story around which the people of the nation can cohere. And this is repeatedly dismissed on the grounds that this must, of necessity, disfranchise and alienate anyone who does not share that story in all its particularity.

At this point, it may be worth remembering the sequence in *The Life of Brian* where the Judean People's Front demands to know 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' We might ask the same of liberal modernity and come up with a long list of benefits and advantages we have enjoyed under this system which I have maligned in so cavalier a manner.[1] The proper answer may be that, just as aqueducts and paved roads and so on did not make the Roman Empire the final word in human history, so the undoubted benefits of liberal modernity are looking a little tattered. The principle charge against it, as Alasdair MacIntyre observed nearly forty years ago in *After Virtue*, is that the particular narratives we live by, and the communities we inhabit which develop, communicate and nurture those narratives, are far more significant than abstract reason in shaping what we believe about the good.[2] Indeed, MacIntyre makes a strong claim that rationality is itself tradition-constituted and not the universal characteristic of humanity which is claimed of it.

The liberal ideal of adjudicating between competing human beliefs and values through neutral institutions and the hypothetical 'person from nowhere' is a chimera. All institutions – markets, polls and so on – are formed by, and serve to form, moral positions. The person from nowhere, who epitomises these neutral structures, does not exist. The pretence of independence and neutrality conceals a real, specific and partial identity. In a field with a plurality of belief systems, the myth of neutral, secular, space hides a

1 One important area where it is impossible to argue that all the mechanisms of liberal modernity should withdraw in favour of small-scale communitarian solutions is that of safeguarding. Safeguarding abuses have served to demonstrate the potentially toxic undercurrents of some communities, and some of the principles of liberal modernity have proved necessary to combat them. The thrust of my argument, however, is that the pendulum has swung too far toward liberal institutions and that, on many fronts, a revived communitarianism constitutes an important corrective. This argument is taken much further in my book, *Tensions in Christian Ethics: an introduction* (London, 2010).

2 A MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (second edition, London, 1985).

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sly attempt to dominate the debate from a solitary set of values – those of secularism.

The alternative to an established Church is not a neutral moral space for political, civic and national life; it is a space framed and dominated by a different specific belief system. And it is intrinsic to secularism's sleight of hand that it simultaneously presents itself as the neutral arbiter between belief systems and needs constantly to portray religious belief as irrational in order to bolster its own claim to be a universal medium. It is not, perhaps, surprising that, as the idea of universal human rationality is more and more widely seen to have failed in its project to eliminate ethical disagreement, secularism is going through its own phase of strident, angry and defensive rhetoric which reveals the same emotive commitment that accompanies rationality in every religious or non-religious belief system.

Brexit and shared identity

These rather theoretical arguments spring not only from my own explorations of what a post-liberal society might look like but from two very illuminating stories, gathered by a colleague, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Anne Richards, a staff member at Church House, lives in one of the strongest Leave-voting areas of Britain – Thurrock in Essex – and she has been deeply involved in the community there before, during and after the referendum. But, in order to dig more deeply, she also visited a strongly Leave-voting *rural* area – Lincolnshire – to hear stories from there.

One story was that of a man in late middle age who had worked all his life in the food-processing industry. Some years ago, the firm appointed a Polish manager. Gradually, more and more Poles were appointed to the workforce. And eventually the day came when a vote was passed among the staff to make Polish the official language of the workplace. I am sure you can imagine that the storyteller perceived this as unjust and outrageous. But on what grounds can a good liberal object? If one culture is believed to be as good as any other, and if the way to resolve disagreements is to vote on the alternatives, what is there to object to, in this story?

The second story is of a village fete – I do not know if it was a church fete or not, but church members were certainly involved. For years, in this village, a group of ladies had knitted cuddly toys to sell for parish funds. Last year, a Romanian family came to their stall and asked to buy the whole stock – at the marked price – for re-sale at profit in Romania. Why did that cause such offence? After all, the women would probably have made more money for parish funds because they would have cleared all their stock. No-one was asking for a discount. Nothing that Romanian family did violated market forces – and it is, surely, the market which determines value when there are

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no other shared moral frameworks. However, that does not reflect how people really work together.

I know that one can deploy Brexit-related arguments to prove or disprove almost anything. But unless we can give a convincing account of the offence that those two stories portray – a much deeper account than a knee-jerk accusation of 'racism' or 'rustic nostalgia' – we will continue to see personal, communal and political relationships fall apart because the structures and ideas we have relied upon to manage difference are not up to the task. In the name of rationality, we have preferred impersonal – and, it is claimed, amoral – structures as the mechanisms to mediate competing demands and values, and so have denuded our shared life of the virtues of solidarity, community, neighbourliness and the bonds which speak of common humanity at a much deeper level than abstracted rationality. And yet the demand grows ever stronger to replace the historic, the traditional and the familiar aspects of national life by something 'streamlined', 'modern' and super-rational – as if more of the toxin must constitute an antidote. Religion would have no place in such a world; nor would monarchy, or anything but the mandate of the ballot box (and, as we have seen in recent weeks, even the Commons is portrayed by the *Daily Express* as an enemy of plebiscite democracy). The cracks in liberal modern assumptions grow ever wider, yet nothing is offered but more of the same.

An old country

Back in the 1980s, the historian Patrick Wright published a series of essays entitled *On Living in an Old Country*. His thesis was that the Left would never understand the UK context until they understood the power on the imagination of the British (and specifically the English) of being an 'old country' with all its illogical institutions. The title lingers. It is, perhaps, part of our post-imperial tragedy to envy the United States for being a 'new country', even as that polity, too, implodes in front of our eyes. And that is one reason why Brexit and Trump are related phenomena – and why the liberal intelligentsia on both sides of the Atlantic have so far not got very far beyond appalled horror in response. The US constitution was one of the great fruits of Enlightenment rationalism (although, even so, it took a long time to eschew slavery). It was designed to forge a nation out of a melting pot of migrants. It enshrined ideas about diversity, equality and inclusion which remain the rallying cries of liberals and progressives worldwide. But, whatever its triumphs and however well it worked for a while, it certainly is not working very well now. Yet we in England have belittled our institutions because they fail to make rational sense; because they are a patchwork of old ways of doing things and offer a perpetual challenge to the assumption that the future is always the enemy of the past; and because they are institutions which enshrine ideas of identity which

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offend the principle that only by having no roots, no history and no particularity at all, can one ever approach the great virtues of fairness and equality.

Establishment and other faiths

So, if the concept of neutral, secular, space fails, and secularism proves incapable of holding the coats while religions slug out their moral disagreements, the pushy alternative to establishment looks rather less fit for purpose. It is no surprise that most of the great world religions represented in the UK are tacitly more content to live in a state with an established Church than under a supposedly neutral secularism. The generally warm relationships between Christian churches, and between the Church of England and, say, Judaism or representatives of Islam or Sikhism in this country, is always a challenge – if not an affront – to the secularist, because secularism's pretention to neutrality requires that all religions are portrayed constantly as being in irreconcilable conflict with each other. Unfortunately, reality has a habit of refuting that assumption. To hear some secularists opining on religion one would imagine that, if you lock a Jew, a Muslim and a Christian in a room for a few days, they will do each other to death because their religious truth claims are incompatible. It is much more likely that they will spend the time working out how to get their own back on the secularist who put them there, because they have more in common with each other than with any creed that excludes their faith from the public square. Prince Charles's much-critiqued comment about being 'Defender of Faith – or Faiths' is entirely consistent with being the supreme governor of an established Church, provided that you are not wedded to the tenets of liberal modernity (and perhaps Prince Charles is not).

So the main alternative to establishment is a straw man. That does not, of course, constitute an argument for establishment as we now have it. But I want to suggest that there are real virtues and potential for good in the present arrangements.

Ecclesiology and the significance of place

The first point is that it is not accidental that Anglicanism and establishment go together. Being the Church that unified a nation was its post-Reformation, and later post-Civil War, vocation. We are a church defined, not by doctrine or a founding divine, but by geography and shared liturgy. We are the Church of *England*, structured around the diocese and most of all the parish. And even in those parts of the Communion where establishment has never pertained and never will, the Anglican ideal is still distinctive: you may believe your neighbour to be an appalling Puritan (or crypto-Catholic) heretic, but you worship alongside him or her because you are neighbours who share physical space in a geographical community. The potency of that settlement remains, despite

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the inevitable stresses as people become less conscious of place as a source of identity and revert to versions of identity politics.

The history of the Church of England and its relationship to the emergence of nation-states is, of course, complex. But I would submit that the particular context which gave birth to the Church of England – a protracted labour, to be sure – created an ecclesiology that embodied important Christian virtues of tolerance and remedies against hubris which have been a significant export to the whole Communion. Our own established status is one way of living out those virtues in the public arena and, for that reason, not to be scoffed at or squandered. Over time, the Church of England has learned how to overcome its fears of the other and to deploy its generous and hospitable ecclesiology, not to 'represent', but to use its position to speak up for the freedom of religions, of formerly marginalised Roman Catholics and dissenters, and, more recently still, other faith communities. The seeds of that hospitable model of establishment are in Anglicanism's DNA, although they took a long time to be revealed and we continue to deploy them, at times, clumsily and insensitively. They are, of course, congruent with what Grace Davie calls a 'weak established church'.

ESTABLISHMENT AND A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF POWER

I also want, very tentatively, to argue that the way in which establishment works reflects a specifically Christian theology of power. Ours is a faith in which the central symbol of power is a man dying on a cross. That is so fundamental, and the shock of it so easily dulled by familiarity, that it needs to be emphasised again and again – because it is such a complete contradiction to both ancient, and contemporary, notions of how power works. Our age tends to treat the model of the corporation as normative for any kind of structure or institution – what, in management theory, is called a convergent model in which power accumulates from a broad base toward a sharp apex in a CEO. It is a surprise to many that the Church of England does not work like that – that the Archbishop of Canterbury is not the powerful Chief Exec of CofE plc – even though many archbishops of Canterbury have expressed frustration that they do not sit at the head of just such a convergent structure (at least when the frustrations of the job feel overwhelming).

But the Church of England does not work like that – and nor does Britain itself, however greatly obscured that truth may be – and the Christian worldview at the heart of establishment may be a key reason why it is different here. When I was six, our teacher told us about Parliament – an infant school lesson in the British constitution – and asked us which was the more powerful: the House of Commons or the House of Lords? Little hands reached for the ceiling, 'House of Lords!' 'House of Lords, Miss!' We naturally assumed that hierarchy of title indicated a hierarchy of power, but it was our first lesson in the inversions that

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characterise this country's understanding of how power is conferred and how it works in practice.

And so, while lords and baronesses may be higher in the social pecking order than mere MPs, this is not reflected in the powers of their respective chambers. Indeed, one of the difficulties with Lords reform is how to construct a second chamber that does not end up with greater legitimacy than the Commons. The tussles across the Atlantic between the Senate and the House of Representatives are a warning that the logic of a rational constitution does not always guarantee functionality.

Power and authority

At the top of the tree, so to speak, is the monarch. Parliament and the armed forces look to the monarch as the source of their authority, and yet the monarchy only works because the Queen withdraws from the direct exercise of power and conceals her personal opinions, recognising that the symbolism of authority, rather than the actuality of power, is the essence of her role. As the Christian ethicist Esther Reed has pointed out, the etymology of 'authority' lies in 'authorship' – and while the author of a story gives it shape and direction, the power of the story lies in the interaction between the text and the readership. Power and authority are not the same thing.[3]

But then, of course, comes the question 'By whose authority is the Queen the Queen?' Not by popular acclaim. Not by a decision of the Government or the whim of the generals; those relationships are the other way around. Nor can they be reciprocal or they become merely circular. The Queen is an anointed monarch. The coronation is not just a bit of invented pomp, although there is an element of that to it. It is a solemn religious rite in which the Church of England, in its priestly role representing the God who was incarnate on earth in Christ, confers upon the monarch her temporal and spiritual authority – which is not the same thing as temporal or spiritual power. In this country, these factors operate in a strange but significant inverted relationship, Ultimately, one of the key things about an established Church is that it anoints the monarch in the name of God.[4] Not a God of power in the conventional sense, but a God whose supreme demonstration of power comes in the Crucifixion, in the low-key and personal manifestations of the Resurrection and in the invisible Spirit which empowers ordinary Christians. That is an

3 E Reed, *The Genesis of Ethics: on the authority of God as the genesis of Christian ethics* (London, 2000).

4 One problem with this argument is that the monarch rules over a nation greater than England. But, as an extension of the point that there is no position from nowhere, the particular role of the Church of England in the coronation need not be an offence to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland unless some invented neutral institution that is not English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish is posited as the only inclusive mechanism to do the job – or if the Church of England were to forget its role of speaking generously for identities beyond its own.

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enormously important perspective on power which is extremely vulnerable to the assumption, which flows from mistrustful individualism, that authority and power over others are always in lock step. But it is not so in Christian theology or, I submit, in our unwritten but theologically inspired constitution.

That may sound a slightly far-fetched proposition. I know it needs more serious theological heavy lifting to make it watertight. But I would cite as an interesting parallel, the arguments put forward by the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff in his work on human rights.[5] Wolterstorff argues that much of our discourse on human rights is problematical because it is, essentially, circular. Human beings have rights because they are human, and those rights are underwritten by the fact that having rights is intrinsic to being human. That argument is vulnerable to any assertion that human rights do not exist – or, in MacIntyre's famous phrase, that belief in human rights is on a par with a belief in witches or unicorns.[6] Rather, Wolterstorff argues, conceptions of human rights rely on something above and beyond humanity to underwrite them; thus, the only way to give meaning and substance to human rights is to start with some sort of theism. And Rowan Williams later took that argument further, arguing that a Christian theism is particularly fit for purpose if we are to make human rights a substantive concept.[7]

. . . and God

Just so, I submit, we can invent constitutions and polities *ad nauseam*, but the source of ultimate authority will remain problematic unless we build in some concept of God. If power is conferred by a human authority, it can be manipulated or taken away by human authority. The constitution becomes just another temporary human endeavour, open to being replaced at will rather than worked with when the chips are down.

So I think that the way in which authority and power are conceived under God forms a theological element in our constitutional arrangements. That in turn underpins the case for an established Church, bound into the structures of the State – not subservient to them, but cognizant of its role at the apex of the symbolism of authority, but at the base of the pyramid of power. It stands for a God who confers authority on the monarch but has even less direct temporal power than the Queen. Such an arrangement is expressive of a Christian theology of power found in service for others (the servant king) and in seeking the common good of all. This in turn expresses itself in the parish structure and in the sense of responsibility for a community which, sadly, liberal modernism interprets as a claim to power over the community.

5 N Wolterstorff, *Justice: rights and wrongs* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).
6 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p 69.
7 R Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London, 2012).

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This is not just a Christian insight but a biblical one. Familiarity may make it easy to miss the fact that any pagan notion of the king as the embodiment of God, as a kind of deity on earth, is entirely absent from the Genesis assertion that God created humanity in God's own image. Rather than God being at the apex of a pyramid of power with human demi-gods wielding earthly power, the image of God is to be found in the whole of frail, flawed humanity. There is no convergent management model here. And, of course, kings themselves appear in the Old Testament narrative as a concession to human weakness rather than as part of God's intentions for the created order. The truth about God is in humankind – ultimately ratified in Christ's Incarnation – not in concentrations of power in the hands of the elite few.

It is not that this points to a single theologically informed polity: other churches and nations do not do too badly. But my case is that establishment makes theological sense and, in an age of dreadful social division, may hold more potential than we think to bind communities together. The point is that it takes commitment to a tradition to understand the way that traditions work – and commitment to a religious faith to understand how the still potent and hugely significant fact of religious persistence affects the ways in which people think and act. Secularism's abstractly rational structures and neglect of human stories will not cut it, as I think some of the underlying discontents around Brexit suggest.

ESTABLISHMENT AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN A TIME OF DIVISION

Would a newly confident understanding of establishment be up to the task of articulating national identity in a way that could command respect today? The modernist mindset runs extraordinarily deep, even in the Church. But it is part of a defence of establishment to show that alternatives are likely to be no better and probably worse, and this defence works even better for being, in my view, theologically coherent. I believe that the Church of England ought to be more robustly committed to its established status, not on grounds of self-interest but as a huge potential contribution to the common good.

I was about to say that the odds on the nation coming, once again, to appreciate the virtues of an established Church are very long. But the present confusions and crises in our body politic make reliable odds impossible to calculate. Whatever happens over Brexit, where would you look for a unifying voice – even though, in Lord Maurice Glasman's words, a 'lot of shit has got to happen' before we can start using the language of reconciliation? The main political parties are a busted flush. The Queen has the longest history of anyone as a focus for unity and moderation. It is not yet clear that her heirs could carry off that delicately poised act without all her years of experience. So, although he certainly will not thank me for this, and would probably be at his most scathing if he heard

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it, I propose our current Archbishop of Canterbury as the dark horse whom we should be watching as the field of unifying figures narrows. Part of this is his personal background in mediation and reconciliation globally. Part of it is that he is involved in, so to speak, a 'dry run' with the extraordinarily painstaking and delicate negotiations in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion on human sexuality. If he can pull that off well, it will be a dramatic sign of Anglicanism's unifying capacities. But, my finger points toward Lambeth primarily because of the historic role of the Church of England, its ecclesiology of seeking to unifying a religiously divided nation, its associated commitment to service in every community and its theological understanding that the passions that motivate people for good and ill cannot be mediated from a presumed neutrality, or by an organisation from nowhere, but only from a position within a story, and a story which starts with crucifixion.

The odds remain long. There are many factors which pull in the opposite direction and it is possible that all religious motivation is now too discredited to be of use or that the concerns of the Church have become too introspective. It is also possible that Brexit-inspired divisions will cut much deeper, with catastrophic consequences, to the point where reconciliation has been overtaken in prospect by the agonised birth pangs of something utterly new. If the Church of England has a unifying role in the nation, it will not be because we chose it but because the virtues of establishment are recognised, however dimly, by others. But if the Church of England forgets that its established status says something important about the God of Jesus Christ, this important part of its vocation may never be realised.

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