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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Rendering to Caesar

The Church of England has been so caught up recently with its internal problems that few have noticed how it is being subtly co-opted by the government to help further its political agenda. This agenda has taken the form of ‘promoting British values’, a vague and omnibus term that covers everything from soggy fish and chips to Morris dancing – and (of course) the Church. The impetus for this somewhat unusual initiative has come from the antics of certain Muslim fundamentalists, who are reported to be taking over state schools by stealth. Apparently they get themselves elected as school governors and before anyone knows it, the head teacher has been forced out, halal food has been introduced into the canteen and pupils are being subsidised to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. Whether this will eventually produce a stream of recruits for the Taliban is still unknown but the trajectory is worrying. Cabinet ministers have concluded that this is not what we want to encourage, and so schools are being told that they must stress ‘British values’ as a way of preventing it. Of course, a ministerial fatwa will have little effect unless the BBC and other public bodies get on board with it, and it seems to be assumed that the Church of England will be co-opted whether it wants to be or not.

This is a difficult one for the Church. Recently the house of bishops, ever ready to make pompous pronouncements on matters beyond their control, announced that any clergy person who is found to be a member of the British National Party and/or the National Front will be disciplined – presumably just like those who enter a same-sex marriage. As far as anyone knows however, there are no such people, so the bishops are safe for the time being. A few commentators have dared to suggest that their ruling infringes freedom of speech, but otherwise there has been no protest. The problem here is not that there is any great desire among the clergy to join nationalist and racist organisations – there is not. Much more serious than this is that by singling out two unpopular groups for condemnation, the bishops have implicitly given the green light to clergy who might want to join other more ‘mainstream’ political parties. Until recently it was impossible for any clergyman to sit in parliament, but one was recently selected as a Conservative candidate at a by-election, so this may be about to change. Historically the Church has been known as ‘the

Tory party at prayer' and it should be careful not to fall into that trap again. It is one thing for the Conservatives to woo Church support, but quite another for the Church to respond to such blandishments.

In fact, a case could be made for the bishops to threaten clergy who join the Conservative Party with exactly the same sanctions that have been announced for the BNP. If the BNP is anti-Christian, what are we to say about a party that has legalised same-sex marriage? How can we support a government that has given the director of Changing Attitude, a gay pressure group within the Church, an MBE in gratitude for his services, when even the bishops have kept him and his organisation at arm's length? The BNP talks, sometimes very loudly, but the Conservatives act – and all the while, their leader claims that the United Kingdom is a Christian country! Of course, the Church could hardly distance itself from the Conservative Party without doing the same for Labour and the Liberal Democrats, not to mention the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Rather than single out one or two particularly obnoxious groups, why do the bishops not make it clear that being in holy orders is incompatible with belonging to a political party of any kind?

This is not because clergy should take no interest in secular affairs or be deprived of the vote, though historians might remind us that the clergy only have the franchise now because back in 1664 the Archbishop of Canterbury surrendered the Church's right to tax itself and the clergy were compensated with voting rights instead. Perhaps we should be campaigning for a restoration of the old constitution – surely a traditional British value – and reassert the demand for fiscal autonomy. We pay taxes but have to fund our church buildings and so on in addition to that. What if we could claim exemption from secular taxes and channel our money into Church funds instead? That is a utopian dream, of course, but there are very practical reasons why the clergy should not be identified with any particular political party or programme. For a start, we have to minister to everyone, whatever their views may be. Nobody should feel excluded from the Church because they think differently on matters of social policy, however wrongheaded they may be. Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world, and it is the Church's duty to maintain that witness.

Another reason for steering clear of party politics is that all government involves compromise. The Liberal Democrats are undoubtedly the most principled party in British politics, but that is why they get nowhere. They stick to their beliefs in closer European integration, a reformed electoral system and the abolition of the House of Lords, even though hardly anybody wants those things – at least not badly enough to vote for them. Those who succeed in politics say one thing and do another, not so much because they are dishonest as because circumstances force them to moderate their views and put unpopular proposals aside. The Church can see the wisdom of this for political parties, but it cannot

follow suit because the Gospel is uncompromising – nobody comes to the Father except through Christ. We cannot allow our message to be diluted in the interests of interfaith harmony, but that is what taking a political approach would require.

A third reason for remaining neutral is that lay Christians should be encouraged to join political parties and work within them for Christian values to be acknowledged in the nation as a whole. It is no good for them all to belong to a single party, because in a democratic system governments change from time to time and Christian influence should not be diminished as a result. But we can only encourage this spread if the Church itself is not identified with any one point of view. The fourth reason, and in some ways the most important, is that the Church must be independent in order to act as the conscience of the state. There will be times when governments do the wrong thing, and when that happens the Church needs to be able to speak truth to power. It would be nice to think that the bishops in the House of Lords do this, but the record shows that they have failed miserably over the years. Andrew Partington studied their role in the 1980s and published a searing indictment of their inability (or unwillingness) to influence government policy in the slightest (*Church and state: The contribution of the Church of England bishops to the House of Lords during the Thatcher years*, Paternoster, 2006). It should be compulsory reading for anyone concerned with Church-state relations, not least because it demonstrates that the much-feared abolition of the episcopal seats in the upper house will make little or no difference to anything.

Finally, the Church must distance itself from party politics because it has its own approach to ‘British values’ that cannot be hijacked for partisan advantage. Anyone who stops to think about it will soon realise that Britain was built on Christian principles, and especially on the beliefs that came to the fore during the Protestant Reformation. A glance at Ireland will demonstrate the truth and the significance of this. The majority of Irish people rejected the Reformation (either actively or passively) and were alienated from the British state as a result. To this day, the dispute in Northern Ireland about whether to remain in the United Kingdom or join the Irish Republic is played out almost entirely on religious lines. Even those Irish Catholics who are critical of the tyranny which their church has exercised over its people and who are appalled at the widespread abuse of children by priests and nuns seldom break rank to the point of becoming unionists, and the official Unionists would not know what to do with them if they did. Religious differences may be privatised in theory but not in practice and (apart from the odd eccentric) it remains true that the more Protestant an Irishman is, the more British he is likely to be too.

A shared Protestantism also undergirds the union between England and Scotland. The national churches of those countries are not in communion

with each other because they have a different polity – episcopalianism *versus* presbyterianism – but this is of relatively minor importance. As Ireland once again demonstrates, Anglicans and Presbyterians have always stood together against the power of Rome, and it was the fear of the Counter-Reformation that prompted the union of the crowns in the first place. Protestantism created the Britain we know, and it should come as no surprise that attempts to deny this in recent years have seen the rise of anti-unionist forces in the northern kingdom which nobody would have imagined before. The Scottish National Party (SNP) is a dangerous organisation because, like nationalist parties everywhere, it cannot distinguish clearly between so-called ‘civic’ nationalism, according to which all residents of a particular territory are equal, and ‘ethnic’ nationalism, which relies on ties of blood and kinship. In the current referendum campaign a Muslim SNP minister of immigrant parentage has been arguing for Scottish independence on the ground that it will do justice to the greatness of ‘our ancestors’, an incongruity that highlights the nature of the dilemma the party faces. The sad truth is that very few SNP voters are swayed by economic arguments for independence; most of them are ethnic nationalists and (in particular) Anglophobes who see this as an opportunity to kick the English in the teeth. Once that is achieved, the immigrants may well be next...

In England (and to some extent in Scotland too) the ethnic nationalist vote has now been captured by UKIP, which like the SNP, uses fallacious economic arguments to bolster its essentially xenophobic agenda. That it should be led by a descendant of French Huguenots who is married to a German woman is ironic but typical of the illogicality of ethnic nationalism – Adolf Hitler was Austrian, Josef Stalin was Georgian and Eamon De Valera was a half-Spanish American. Who would have guessed? Nigel Farage is not in their league, of course – at least, not yet. But just as the other nationalisms gained traction because they were essentially secularised religions that substituted ‘national’ values for Christian ones, so UKIP is in danger of doing the same in Britain, dragging the supposedly more respectable political parties along with it. The fact that the party’s programme is presented in social and economic terms (‘we would be so much better off outside the European Union because then we could send those unwanted immigrants home’) should not deceive us. The underlying agenda is clear, and the Church authorities ought to stand up and say so before we end up with an England governed by UKIP, a Scotland run by the SNP and an Ireland in the grip of Sinn Fein – a nightmare scenario that is closer to reality than many people imagine.

So what about ‘British values’? The Church of England is a national institution but it cannot succumb to the allure of nationalism. Whatever values Britain has are those that are derived from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is proclaimed to the whole world, even when it is not

heard or accepted. If we have been blessed in the past it is because we have adhered to that Gospel, often in spite of ourselves. We are sinners saved by grace, after all, and cannot claim to be more virtuous than other nations. The British were more active slave traders than anyone else, we began the industrial revolution with all its accompanying horrors, and we even invaded China so as to be able to sell opium there. We cannot be proud of such a record, but we know that as each of these evils arose, so there was a voice of Christian conscience that fought against these abuses and that eventually prevailed. The British Empire may have been built on war and greed, but it became an agent of positive social change and ended peacefully. No other empire left a Commonwealth behind it which, again with ups and downs, manages to stand for the values that led British Christians to create it. This year we are commemorating the centenary of the events that led Europe into an orgy of self-destruction. Six great empires (Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Ottoman Turkey) rushed headlong into the abyss, but a hundred years later only one of the survivors can commemorate the anniversary with an international sporting event that continues to bind its former colonies together. At another level, only the United Kingdom can boast a head of state who knew the one who took the country into war in 1914 – George V was our present queen's grandfather, whose look-alike cousins in Germany and Russia have gone the way of all flesh.

We have survived war and the passage of time better than most others, thanks mainly to the Christian principles that have governed our way of doing things, even when we have not recognised them. The Anglican Communion owes its existence to the worldwide spread of those values, and it is no accident that today the Church of England is being challenged by those overseas churches to maintain them in the face of countervailing pressures at home.

Meanwhile, the spiritual calling of the Church of England remains unchanged. We are here to preach the Gospel to a nation that needs to hear it. We are failing in this because too many of our leaders have bought into the *status quo*, even as they claim to be anti-establishment 'progressives'. Instead of proclaiming the unchanging truth of the Christian faith, they have been tempted to jettison it in favour of the latest political fad – in the name of 'relevance', of course. But the thing that is truly relevant, and that will remain so when the current arguments over policy are long forgotten, is that God so loved our sinful world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. That is what the Christians of this country (and of all countries) stand for, and it is that which should be the guiding light of our nation and its behaviour. We have a long way to go, but our history shows that things have been bad before and that God has raised up his prophets to rescue us from our own folly. Let us pray that this will happen again and that the British

people may once more proclaim values that are not so much theirs as those of the Lord of heaven and earth, to whom alone all honour, praise and glory are due. As citizens of the earthly kingdom we must let Caesar have his due, but at the same time we must remind him that he too must bow to God, who has given him whatever small authority he has. Nations and states come and go, but the Word of our God stands for ever, and it is that Word which the Church exists above all to proclaim.

GERALD BRAY