

Church and state need to be set free

Posted: Thu, 22 Nov 2012 by [Simon Barrow](#)

Simon Barrow makes the case for disestablishment from a Christian perspective

If there is one thing that might pleasantly surprise the Church of England in the throes of its embarrassment over failing to approve women bishops, it is surely that so many people who never darken its doorsteps still seem to care rather passionately about what it does – albeit in a generally less than sympathetic way.

Given that fewer than a million people now attend weekly services of the 'national church' in a country of 50 million, one might wonder quite why that is. Judging from the volumes of media coverage and online comment the goings on at this week's General Synod have generated, popular nerves have definitely been touched. But of what kind and to what effect?

The gut issue for many seems to be basic fairness. To many people – religious or otherwise – it seems incredible that an institution of the modern era which is established under the Crown, has unelected members in parliament, receives financial privileges from the treasury and is involved in running schools and welfare programmes should still regard it as acceptable to discriminate against half the human race.

Of course, most in the Church of England do not want to do this. More than 74% of Synod members voted for women bishops. Some 80% of churchgoers approve the change. 42 out of 44 dioceses have also balloted in favour. What has happened is that the Church has allowed itself to be held to ransom by an obdurate minority, some of whom barely regard those with whom they disagree as properly Christian, and most of whom will only be satisfied by provisions which enable them to operate 'no go' areas for women and LGBT people within the institution – discriminatory arrangements which reduce others to a second-class citizenship or leadership.

How the Church of England moves forward from this impasse is a fascinating and difficult question in its own right. But increasingly people within and beyond its walls are asking another one. Why should these internal wrangles and problems be superimposed on society at large? For on the terms of the current settlement between church and state they most surely are being.

So, for example, the Church of England (along with other religious bodies) enjoys a range of exemptions from the Equality Act 2010 which impact the employment rights of a significant number of people. The Church has also used its reserved places in the House of Lords to try to stop others, including Quakers and Liberal Jewish synagogues, from conducting civil partnerships. It wants to stop same-sex marriage, not for its own congregants but for everyone. It also runs taxpayer-funded schools that are allowed by law to select pupils and staff on religious grounds, whether parents and children in the wider community like it or not.

There is a massive dose of 'having your cake and eating it' in all this. It increasingly looks like privilege without responsibility. This is the reason why questions are now being revived concerning the Church of England's established status; about whether male leaders of one denomination from one religion in one country should be in the UK legislature as of right; and about whether exemptions from anti-discrimination legislation should automatically be granted to a body which styles itself a national institution, but still wishes to behave like a private boys club.

In the past these questions have been difficult to raise, at least in any way that might promote actual change. But with Synod's abject and humiliating failure to approve women bishops, two changes have become visible. First, the fund of public goodwill towards "the dear old Church of England" seems to have been further eroded. Second, the party political division over these issues appears to be breaking down. Once the C of E was dubbed "the Tory Party at prayer". Now the Tories are led by someone who is prepared to chide the Church for excluding women and to disagree with it over civil same-sex marriage, just as Tony Blair was prepared to go against the Catholic Church hierarchy over the issue of discrimination against lesbian and gay couples by its adoption agencies. Voices right, left and centre are now uttering the word 'disestablishment'. The political ground is shifting, and over the past week it has taken another discernable lurch.

It is important to realise, and to stress, that the issue here is not about restricting religious freedom. On the contrary, freeing the church from the state and vice versa would enable both sets of institutions to address their respective problems and challenges without having to get bogged down in the incommensurate agendas of the other. It is not the job of the government to resolve theological differences within religious bodies, and it is not the job of churches or faith groups to require others to be governed by rules based on the beliefs of one minority.

So much though I want to see women (and indeed gay) bishops in the Church, I do not think the government should force it to have them. But by the same token, there is no reason in a plural society why the Church should be able to stop the government from licensing marriages and partnerships for same-sex couples. The Church should remain free to bless or not bless those relationships, but not to prevent others from forming and celebrating them. Freedom is a two-way street.

The case I am putting forward, and which has almost certainly been strengthened by shenanigans in the General Synod this week, is not simply a secular one, either. The argument for the independence of church and state is one that has been strongly articulated within the theological traditions of nonconformity for many years. It argues that non-compulsion is the essence of true religion, collusion or subjugation a dangerous threat to it.

Along with the emancipatory message of Jesus, who was himself executed by an unholy alliance of state and religion for his subversion, this spirit of mutual freedom is one the Church of England most definitely needs to embrace as it addresses both its own problems and its changing place within the fabric of an increasingly diverse society.

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