

Better the muddle you know: Disestablishment and gay marriage

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If, as looks very likely, gay marriage becomes law, the established Church will be opposed to the law of the land in a way that is surely unprecedented. The Church itself hinted at this last summer, hoping to dissuade the Government from moving ahead on the issue.

So might it really be that gay marriage leads to disestablishment? I doubt it, sadly. Establishment has, over the decades, become a vague and stretchy thing. Church and state are like two slices of pizza that have basically been pulled apart, but are still joined by the gooey stringy cheese on the top. It is hard to believe that anything is capable of effecting a clean break. A few conservatives will say that the Church should cut its links with a state that redefines marriage to include gay couples. But they won't really mean it: they know that the state has for decades been promoting secular liberalism over what they consider traditional Christian morality, and they accept this. And most liberals will be reluctant to advocate disestablishment. In their desire to push for reform of the Church on homosexuality, they will say that it must reform in order to move with the moral opinion of the nation and justify its established status. So the new situation will weaken establishment yet further, but the cheese on that pizza is very stretchy. (By the way, I admit I stole this analogy from one of Andrew Marr's historical documentaries a few years back.)

On the other hand, whenever the anomalous nature of establishment is exposed in a new way, Anglicans have cause to ponder the absurdity of their tradition. Most will shrug a pious shrug, but a few will say: 'There is too much muddle here! For Christ's sake let us rethink!' For me it was 9/11: I felt the need to affirm the liberal state, which affirms religious liberty without interference from a vague theocratic inheritance. In the same way, some younger Anglicans will now say: 'Enough muddle! If the state is guided by secular liberal principles, even to the point of redefining marriage in defiance of its established Church, then why on earth are we going on with the charade of having an established Church? It looks time for a bit of rethink.'

Of course professional church people have no appetite for such rethinking. What would they gain from casting doubt on the viability of the Church? The present situation might be a precarious muddle, but why invite its collapse? Better stick with the muddle you know. But some of us, though British Anglicans, cannot countenance this level of muddle. We must seek fresher air. We must seek the reinvention of Anglicanism, away from the old familiar lie of establishment.

Of course this is no magic bullet. A disestablished Church still has difficult issues to face, about how to relate itself to the liberal state, where to stand on homosexuality, and how to engage the world around it. But it is able to face the future with honesty.

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