

Bradlaugh Lecture 2020: Disestablishing the Church of England

[Stephen Evans] Good evening, everyone. Welcome to this year's Bradlaugh Lecture. I'm Stephen Evans, the Chief Executive of the National Secular Society. Thanks for joining us on what will probably be quite a long night for the US election watchers amongst us. But at least for the time being, we can relax and focus on matters closer to home.

I'm sorry we can't do this in Manchester, which has fast become the spiritual home of the Bradlaugh Lecture, but I'm delighted that we can be with you this evening, wherever you are, for this, the first ever online Bradlaugh Lecture, which we're bringing to you in partnership with our friends at Conway Hall. Thanks to everyone who made donations to Conway Hall when making their booking. As I'm sure you'll appreciate, this is a very difficult time for event venues, and Conway Hall is one of the for event venues, and Conway Hall is one of the best, so your contributions are very welcome.

The lecture itself is named after the founder of the NSS. You should be able to see behind me there, Charles Bradlaugh, who has got quite a story. Despite being elected as an MP to Parliament in 1880, he was effectively denied his seat for almost six years on account of his atheism. After finally making it into Parliament, he was instrumental in bringing about a change in the law to ensure that non-religious MPs could take their seats in Parliament by way of a non-religious affirmation, rather than a religious oath by swearing their allegiance to god.

Today we continue Bradlaugh's work by campaigning for a secular state; a secular state where everyone's human rights are respected and everyone's freedoms are balanced fairly, so no one is either disadvantaged or advantaged on account of their beliefs. All of our work is made possible by our members. So, if you do support what we do, please do become a member, which you can do online via the website.

Tonight we are delighted and honoured to be joined by Geoffrey Robertson QC to discuss two important enlightenment principles: free speech and the separation of church and state, which, in the UK of course, means disestablishment of the Church of England. Geoffrey is a leading human rights barrister, an academic, author and broadcaster. He's the founder and the head of Doughty Street Chambers, the UK's largest human rights practice. During his distinguished career as trial council, human rights advocate, and UN Judge, Geoffrey has defended blasphemers, such as the Gay News magazine in their famous court battle against Mary Whitehouse, after they published the poem 'The Love that Dares to Speak its Name'. Geoffrey has also represented Salman Rushdie in a blasphemy case brought against The Satanic Verses. In 2010 he published The Case of the Pope, which argued that Pope Benedict was guilty of protecting paedophiles, that the Vatican isn't really a sovereign state, and that the Pope shouldn't be immune from prosecution.

Quite right. So whether you consider yourself to be a disestablishmentarian or an anti-disestablishmentarian, I'm sure you'll find tonight's lecture well worth tuning in for. Geoffrey will speak for around 50 minutes to an hour this evening, which will be followed by a short Q&A session. So if you'd like to ask any questions please get your questions in by the Q&A function at the bottom of the screen. We do need to finish by 8 30, but I'll be sure to get through as many questions as possible. Just to be clear, your videos are automatically turned off, so don't worry, we can't see you. We can't hear you either, so please do use the Q&A function if you'd like to ask any questions of Geoffrey, and use the chat function if you need to speak to a member of the team for any reason.

So that's about all from me now, so let's just pray the wi-fi works, and without further delay I'll ask Geoffrey to make sure he's unmuted, which I think he is, and I'll hand you over to Geoffrey Robertson QC. Thank you.

[Geoffrey Robertson] Good evening. It's a real honour to deliver a lecture in commemoration of Charles Bradlaugh, who founded this society 150 years ago. He was a solicitor's clerk, well known to Charles Dickens, who immortalized that group of lesser lawyers. Although Bradlaugh at a young age was quite precocious - he was a Sunday school teacher by the time he was 17 - he noticed some discrepancies between the bible and the 39 commandments. The vicar denounced him as an atheist and threw him out.

His parents threw him out onto the streets, but he was picked up by the widow of Richard Carlile, that courageous publisher who went to prison for publishing Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason*. He was introduced to George Holyoake who saw his potential. These free thinkers, it's nice to think of them at a time when they were persecuted, at a time when they were put in prison for their religious non-beliefs, that they stuck together and helped each other. Well, Bradlaugh didn't need much help. He was a brilliant writer and editor, and he published a paper called *The Reformer*, which was very soon charged with blasphemy and sedition, as it should have been in the law as in those days. He was acquitted, unusually. Usually they were convicted, but he was acquitted.

However, when he moved on, with Annie Besant, to deal with birth control, that was too much initially for the Victorians. In 1877 he was convicted for writing a book with her called *The Fruits of Philosophy: a Private Companion for Young Married Couples*. But they succeeded on appeal, because the prosecution was so prurient that it refused to set out the obscene passages in the indictment, and on that technicality the Court of Appeal released them from prison.

He entered parliament in 1880 - but he didn't. The electors of Northampton elected him, but he refused to take the oath. That there was a terrific kerfuffle in Parliament, about whether he could be an MP by affirming and not taking the oath on the bible. This raged back and forth. There were committee after committee deciding whether he could be an MP if he didn't swear on the bible, and then Bradlaugh said: all right, I'll take the oath.

But he wrote to *The Times* a few days before saying I'm only taking the oath because it's full of meaningless words so my conscience isn't clogged by it. So then there was another debate over whether he could take the oath without accepting that it had any meaning. So back and forth it went. He had Gladstone on his side, George Bernard Shaw, and so on. But it took six years before he was allowed to become an MP by taking the meaningless oath. He was, at one point, arrested by the Serjeant at Arms and put in a small cell beneath Big Ben, the place for contenders of Parliament, the last person to occupy it, I think. It's still there in his honour.

Finally, when he became an MP in 1886, his great achievement was to initiate *The Oaths Act of 1888*, and that allowed agnostics and atheists to sit in Parliament on taking a solemn affirmation. But it did more than that. It allowed them to be witnesses in court - you weren't allowed to be a witness in court if you wouldn't take the oath on the bible - and it allowed them to be jurors - jurors could not sit unless they made a solemn statement on the bible. So we remember him today.

When I did jury trials it was heart warming to find those who were prepared to wave away the bible that the usher would proffer them, and take instead the card which allowed them to make a solemn affirmation. One's heart leapt because it was always felt, or I felt, that a juror who was doubtful about the existence of god, might doubt the veracity of the police evidence. So it was an important thing that is still remembered in the courts. So the flame still burns.

It was a tragedy that he died in 1891, just five years after his entry to Parliament. His funeral was attended by 3 000 people, including the young Gandhi. Of course the church put round a rumour that he had a deathbed conversion, but his daughter published a detailed refutation of that.

Well, let me begin by making a confession: I am a communicant member of the Church of England. I haven't yet, to my knowledge, been discommunicated. But I took the oath to become a member, I had the archbishop's hands laid upon me at the age of 16. This was a better age than my Jewish friends, of course, who had been bar mitzvahed at 13, and certainly a better age than my Roman Catholic friends, who went to communion and confession from the age of seven, being brainwashed into believing that the priests who so often abused them, as a Royal Commission has recently found, were the agents of god, so had that perverse power over them.

I, like Bradlaugh, had done well at Sunday school. In the suburbs of Sydney at the time, I was considered ready for confirmation, and the anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Archbishop Hugh Gough, a rather upper class Englishman, was to officiate. He was famous at the time because he had built a rapport with the young editor of the local tabloid, one Rupert Murdoch, aged about 24 I think, and he would always have the front page headlines: "The younger generation is wallowing in a mire of sexual immorality" he said, just before my conversion.

I wasn't doing much, or need any, wallowing, but the archbishop certainly was. Throughout the range of his archbishopric, he was being cited in secret divorce petitions, and, of course, this was hushed up. The established church could not bear the embarrassment. Even young Rupert was powerless to print the whole sordid story. It was whispered in the Catholic confessionals, which was the way stories got around in those censorious times. The promiscuous primate was sent back to England, to the smallest parish in the country, as his punishment. So there was, I suppose, my first experience of the church's problem with sex.

This is something, I suppose, may not be surprising given the way in which it was first established. Now, if you wanted to disestablish a national institution, it seems to me only fair to look at the way it was established in the first place, because obviously that should be a matter of national pride, a result of some moral or intellectual movement that should be specially remembered 500 years later, something in our history that we can cherish and applaud.

Well, let's face it, the Church of England was established because of the lust of a pathological monster. That was how Henry VIII was described in The Times last week, as the evidence came to light of how he had planned to the last detail the grisly death of Anne Boleyn. The church and pro-church historians would have us believe that he was motivated by a desire to leave a son to rule England. The problem with that, firstly, is that endorses the view that women were so inferior they weren't up to snuff as rulers, but he already had a perfectly good son by Bessie Blount, who was Maid-of-honour to Queen Catherine. He looked like Henry and was called the Duke of Richmond, and was being groomed to take the throne if Henry failed to have a male heir.

But Henry, as we know, fell in love with Anne, and, as every schoolboy knows who's read his love letters, he wanted to slobber all over her little "duckys", in other words, to have sex with her. And, no doubt, Anne did play him along for several years while Wolsey tried to obtain the pope's support for a divorce on the grounds that he'd married his deceased brother's wife, and hadn't noticed it for 17 years. He was becoming desperate and doubtless held off, I think, until late probably December 1532. He married her secretly in January 1533 and the baby was due in September.

It was Thomas Cromwell who engineered the establishment of the Church of England by an Act of Parliament called, uninspiringly, an Act in Restraint of Appeals. That's the Church of England's

beginning: an Act in Restraint of Appeals. In other words, it abolished the pope as the final appeal court for English ecclesiastical matters, including divorce. Now, okay, there was a bit of brexiteering about this act by Cromwell. He played on national sympathies, asserting in the statute that this Realm of England is an empire, an independent sovereign state, independent of the pope, and that the king is supreme head of both the church and the state. That's where it all comes from: an Act in Restraint of Appeals.

Well, a few weeks later, in May, Cranmer dissolved his marriage with Catherine. Five days later the secret marriage with Anne was announced, and she was crowned as Queen. For those six months, of course, he'd be living bigamously with two wives, but when the news reached Rome, the pope of course excommunicated him and the Church of England was born. As Roger Scruton says honestly, I quote: "much of it following the curious logic of Henry's hormones".

It's interesting, certainly, and enjoyable in a way, as we sit back in lock down to watch repeats of Wolf Hall, but it's not particularly inspiring. The events are not such as to induce very much national pride. The Church, of course, could have told it differently as a wonderful feminist fable: Behold a country where women are inferior, where women are viewed as not fit to rule, and then Anne contrives, with her erotic skill, to win Henry's heart and his cod piece, and to induce the breach with Rome. Then he has her murdered by Cromwell's false evidence and the agency of what's called a kangaroo court, although as an Australian I can't bear that term. I don't know what our beloved marsupial has done to become a symbol of injustice. But there's no evidence; I think it's quite plain that this was a frame-up, that there was only one person who confessed: the pop idol of the court, a young musician, who was severely tortured by Cromwell to get that confession.

But the story ends happily, doesn't it, as the feminist fable could be told, when the girl baby that Anne had cradled moments before she went to execution became, at the age of 25, the queen who re-established the Church, which had been bloodied in for a while by Mary, re-established the Church of England in such a way, in the settlement, everyone had to attend, which is certainly not the case today, where so few do, less than 2% of the British public go to the Church of England with any regularity.

You could tell the story that way, or you could tell it by reference to the Cambridge apostles. Not Philby and Blunt: 400 years earlier there was a group who studied Luther secretly at Cambridge: Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley and others. They laid the intellectual foundation, opposition to indulgences and the illogicalities of Catholicism. Their success came in the end because of this monster king's desire to have sex with the woman he loved. There it is.

One of the consequences of having a state Church is that attacks upon it are regarded as attacks on the state, a form of sedition that was decided by Lord Chief Justice Hale in 1677, convicting a man who said religion is a cheat. To say that religion is a cheat, said Lord Chief Justice Hale, "is to dissolve all those obligations whereby the civil societies are preserved, and that Christianity is parcel of the laws of England; and therefore to reproach the Christian religion is to speak in subversion of the law".

Well, it wasn't, of course, but this doctrine held sway for centuries. Particularly after the French revolution there was a rash of blasphemy prosecutions. Judges jailed booksellers and publishers especially, for publishing the works of Tom Paine: *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, courageous men like Richard Carlile. As late as 1840 a book that attacked the old testament's violence saw its author imprisoned because, I quote the judge, "he was careless of the effect it might have on the morals of the unthinking working class". There, like obscenity, the law of blasphemy is

there to protect the unthinking working class from thinking thoughts that the establishment didn't want them to think.

I think this rash of blasphemy prosecutions only really stopped in 1851, when the law offices wrote a note saying that lectures given by John Stuart Mill, expressing mildly agnostic ideas, were technically blasphemy but it wouldn't be in the public interest to prosecute him. So, since it was a judge made law, the judges changed it a little. In the case of Ramsey and Foot in 1883, they ruled that a mere denial of Christianity was not enough to constitute the offence of blasphemy. This was important for Bradlaugh's battle at the time, to be an MP and not take the oath. It said if the decencies of controversy are observed, that was not the case with other religions. You could be as rude as you like about Methodists and Catholics, but, the judges said, a person may, without being liable to prosecution for it, attack Judaism or Mahometism or even any sect of the Christian religion, save the established religion of the country.

So there you had the blasphemy law protecting the Anglican Church. No one could poke fun at the Anglican Church. If they did, then, like the appropriately named Mr Gott in 1922, he was jailed for publishing a little booklet called *Rib Ticklers for Parsons*, one of which said that Jesus entered Jerusalem like a circus clown on the back of two donkeys. That earned him 18 months in prison. He was the last person to be put in prison in Britain for blasphemy, and by 1977 the crime was thought to be a dead letter.

But that was when Mary Whitehouse, fancying herself as moral protector of the realm, and her counsel a red-faced, tub thumping, gay bashing, barrister called John Smythe, pounced upon a poem in *Gay News* which suggested that Christ's love for humankind had extended to a gay centurion, and had been consummated when he was on the cross. Mary was given to describing herself as "just a Colchester housewife" but she was, in fact, a front for the very well-funded Moral Re-Armament Movement, determined to stamp out the beginnings of gay liberation.

John Smythe's argument was simple: Christianity is part of the Law of England. The established Church held that homosexuality was a sin, but the church fundamental doctrine was that Christ was without sin. Therefore attributing to him any attraction to a gay centurion was blasphemy, punishable by imprisonment for life. Smythe described the metaphors of the poet, the Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, as, I quote "So vile it would be hard for the most perverted imagination to conjure up anything worse." I think it was Mark Twain who noted this phenomenon: "To the pure all things are impure". Just how pure Smythe was, he was of a devotee of what he called muscular Christianity, we'll see in a little while.

They impanelled the jury. John Mortimer and I were defending. We glumly noticed that none of them took their oath as an affirmation, they all took it on the bible. Where was Bradlaugh when he was needed? Our first submission was that Christianity was not part of the law, but the judge ruled that because the Anglican Church was established, that meant it was. He was the president of a synagogue and thought, for some reason, that it would make him famous to be the first Jewish judge in history to preside over a conviction for Christian blasphemy. He said so in his autobiography admitting his total bias, but adding that he was not alone in securing the conviction. When writing his summing up, he said "I was conscious of an unseen superhuman hand guiding my pen."

I have to say that if God did write the summing up, it would have been fairer to the defence. It was a direction to convict. He told the jury that, since they'd all taken their oaths on the new testament, they might feel obliged to convict. He allowed Mary's followers to gather in the corridors of the court, praying for a conviction, and refused to allow the defendant, the editor of *Gay News*, to give

evidence as a witness in his own defence. That's how ridiculous the trial was. That was the appeal point on which we should have won.

I'll never forget standing in the corridor with John Mortimer. You wait in the corridor until the decrepit old law lords shuffled past and into the House of Lords chamber, where they sat in those days, as the Supreme Court of the land. At about 10 27, they came in; at 10 30, the television monitors all crackled into life and we had to listen to prayers, parliamentary prayers, said every morning by a bishop of the Anglican Church, on this day, to help these elderly law lords to convict a blasphemer. Well, there were five of them, and two of them were very good, brilliant lawyers: Lord Diplock and Lord Edmund-Davies. I'm sure they hated the poem but they were rigid in their application law. The other two: one was a Catholic who refused even to read it, so biased was he, and the other was Reggie Manningham-Buller, Lord Dilhorne, 'Reginald Bullying Manner' as he was known when he was Macmillan's Attorney General, who advised to prosecute Lady Chatterley's Lover. So it was two all.

A great surprise, we lost Leslie Scarman, who was a great judge and true liberal, but he was exercised very much at the time by racism in society, and he was anxious to have all races protected. He realized, and he was right, that attacks on Islam would soon become just another form of racial hatred. So he said that blasphemy should be a strict liability offense, covering insults to all religions. This was a mistake, of course, historically, and it left the law very unclear.

I made quite a good living out of advising as an expert on blasphemy. I was hired by the British Board of Film Censors for an opinion on whether *The Life of Brian* was blasphemous, and they should stop it. I said it wasn't, because, of course, Brian was not the messiah, he was a very naughty boy. Then I was retained to advise on the Hollywood movie 'The Last Temptation of Christ'. After the Gay News trial judge, a dreadful man called King-Hamilton had written to *The Times*. He hadn't seen the film, of course, but he demanded that it be prosecuted because he'd heard that it was scurrilous. I saw it. The only scurrilous thing about it was that Christ and his disciples were all played by Americans, while Judas, the devil and all the baddies spoke with English accents.

But the end of blasphemy came as a result of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who pronounced, in 1988, a fatwa on Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*. Salman had to go into hiding, and a group of Muslim barristers had the bright idea of trying to flush him out by serving a summons for both blasphemy and sedition. They relied on Lord Scarman's unwise words about blasphemy being able to extend to all religions. Magistrate threw the case out on the basis you could only blaspheme against the Anglican Church. So they took their forensic jihad to the High Court. There was a lot of publicity.

I got a call from Scotland Yard just before the case, and they said we've identified you as a potential terrorist target, grade three. Apparently the fear was that Islamic fundamentalists, failing to discover where Salman was hiding, would choose his barrister as a sufficient substitute. They said we're going to come around and show you how to detect a bomb under your car. I thought they'd come round with some James Bond-like electronic device. They came around with a broom and a mirror, and showed us how to tie the mirror to the broom and look under the car. My wife wailed "but it all looks like a bomb under there". In any event, we got by with a few death threats, badly written by hand and sent to the court. Now these threats come by email or on social media, but then, those days, they were not communicated readily.

The court, and it was a top divisional court, ruled that blasphemy only covered the Anglican Church and that it shouldn't be prosecuted unless it incited violence. The government accepted this view. It

said it's damaging and divisive legislation, and in due course, years later, when hardly anyone noticed, blasphemy was abolished. It slunk from view.

But whatever happened to John Smythe? After Gay News he offered his evangelical services to a famous Anglican boys school near his country home. He would select most attractive of the 14 and 15 year olds and take them to his potting shed. There he'd explain that God wanted them punished for masturbating. He would take their trousers down and beat them until the buttocks bled causing extreme pain and long-term psychological damage. The headmaster was told all about this. You know what he did? He called Smythe and said I won't go to the police if you leave the country. So Smythe did, causing other allegations against him to be made in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The scandal was exposed by Channel 4, about 10 years ago, and police investigated and brought charges. Sadly, Smythe died before he could be arrested. The Church's report, which has been long delayed, is due next year, and I'm told it will identify some very prominent clergy who knew about his abuse back in the 1980s, but, like the headmaster, did nothing about it. Only a fortnight ago, of course, we had the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, which found our national church was guilty of covering up child abuse in order to protect its reputation and its finances.

These bishops, they are bishops, are given a privileged place in our legislature. 26 privileged places as Lords Spiritual with the Lords Temporal crowding in the House of Lords. Would we miss them if the Church was disestablished? I don't think so. We haven't noticed the blasphemy law and we wouldn't miss the 26 privileged places in a disestablished Church. The Church has been disestablished in Wales back in 1920. The Church of Scotland isn't really established because it doesn't want any links with government, quite rightly.

So the Church of England is unique. All religions clinging to these links with the state. What does it mean? Well, for a start it accepts a monarch as its head. As head of the Church as well as head of the State, she's legally dubbed Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England, they come together. Any changes to the Book of Common Prayer must be not only passed by the General Synod, which is right, but formally approved by both Houses of Parliament. Don't change your prayers unless Parliament approves. This is not just giving Caesar his due, but allowing Caesar to walk all over you should he choose. What church with any integrity would allow that? To be run by the state and allow its bishops and archbishops to be appointed by the Prime Minister?

The Church of England is really in the hands of the state, not [that] the state bothers very much to interfere, Mrs Thatcher did a few times on choices of bishops but they're a pretty subservient lot these days. Although I must say that Rowan Williams, who is a considerable mind, alone with the bishops, has said disestablishment would give the Church a certain integrity. How right he is. And how the Church lacks integrity by its truckling to state control, even if that control is rarely used. It's humiliating. It should be humiliating to a church with the integrity that comes from independence. So I think disestablishment is a good thing for the Church.

Then, of course, there's the phenomenon that John Mortimer and I encountered are in waiting to argue the Gay News blasphemy case, the daily prayers from the Book of Common Prayer and the bible, said by bishops every day on a daily rota. Why is it thought that a reading from the apostle will inspire MPs to argue about brexit? Not only is it a waste parliamentary time and a snub to those with no Anglican faith or no faith at all, and it's incompatible with the democratic ideal of separation of church and state, but it's bloody annoying, because for an MP to reserve a seat at Prime Minister's Question time, he or she has to put down a green card indicating that they'll attend prayers at the start of the day. It's the same system that German tourists use when they leave their towels to

reserve the best chairs by the pool. It forces MPs to listen to prayers if they want to ask questions of the Prime Minister.

I'm very glad to read that it's been challenged by an associate of this society, Crispin Blunt, who has the support of the Speaker. No one should be forced to listen to prayers as the price of asking a question to the Prime Minister. MPs, representatives of the nation, where 52% of the public on the latest survey say they have no religion, and where just 12% of those who have religion say they're affiliated to the Church of England. It's absurd to think that MPs will be inspired by prayers from a Church in which so few of their constituents worship. Even more absurd is the notion that we should be the only country in the world, apart from Iran, to have theocrats sitting as of right in our legislature.

The Bishops Bench is an anomaly and an anachronism. There are 26 of them. Its defenders say it's there to promote morality in Parliament, although that's an argument that's difficult to sustain. In the recent years the Bishops Block, as I call it, has rejected a number of legislative initiatives, mostly to do with cutting down on Church privileges. They're wholly unrepresentative, even of their own flock, being mainly male, and white, middle class, and far from promoting morality, they've been hostile to women's rights. At first they held out against women bishops until 2015. They've been unanimously opposing same-sex marriage and the decriminalization of assisted suicide.

So it's no answer, though too often the answer that is given, that we should create places for leaders of other religions, far less progressive even than our own bishops. I don't want to get into the vexed question of House of Lords reform, but surely its members should be elected, appointed, on their own merits, rather than as placement of an official Church.

Let me now turn to perhaps the most important aspect, looming aspect, of the Establishment of the Church. Nowhere will it be more apparent and seem more jarring and antediluvian than at the coronation of Charles III. Now, I must be careful here. The 1381 Treason Act makes it a crime, carrying life imprisonment, to imagine the death of the monarch. But just suppose in 2023 the Queen decides, after 70 years of loyal and grateful service, to do a Pope Benedict and retire. Nothing to stop her. She may, of course, do a Rupert Murdoch and decide to remain as head of her empire, but retirement she deserves. Then we would have to crown Prince Charles.

There'd be lots of consequences, the least of which would be my own overnight transformation into a KC, King's Council. I'd have to pay a lot of money, I imagine, for some new letters patent.

The coronation ceremony, and I'm old enough to remember quite vividly the last one in 1953, a small child drinking in the pageantry. The pageantry will come back. They'll dust off the golden coach, the plush red seats, the exotic footmen, and footwomen, I imagine this time, the bejewelled crowns and orbs, the impedimenta of royalty. But it will be a Church of England show. A restatement of the divine right of kings, that which Charles I was taken to the block for. A new king, chosen by his Hanoverian genes, will be anointed and crowned in a religious ceremony, in which he will take the coronation oath. He will swear to preserve the laws of God, the Anglican religion, the doctrine of the Church, and the rights and privileges of its clergy.

It is quite extraordinary, isn't it? Instead of swearing to uphold the constitution, and the rights of Parliament, and of the people, and the guidance of the judiciary, this King comes forth as bound only by the unknowable laws of God and a full-blooded devotion to the doctrines and teachings of the Church of England. What message does this send? This ceremony, meant to unite the nation, which, in fact, only refers to a small part of it, and excludes those who are members of other churches, and the majority of the people who are members of no church at all. Well, Prince Charles, to do him

justice, has said he wants to be crowned as defender of faith, rather than defender of the Church of England, and that's an improvement, but not by much.

What about defending those of no faith? The majority. What about a tribute to those who've done most for parliamentary democracy? The English dissenters, the puritans, the Regis Act, who envisaged the most important principles of modern democracy, including the separation of church and state. That may be too much to hope for, but in any view, there must be a careful and open consultation about the coronation, the role of the Church, other than providing a picturesque backdrop in Westminster Abbey, for a ceremony that will otherwise send a message of discrimination and privilege, and above all of silliness. Swearings-in should be taken seriously.

Much as I shared, with Charles, the youthful love of the Goon Show, I do think that a change of monarch should be ushered in with some dignity and logic. But here I go, trying to make monarchy more acceptable by disestablishing the Church. I should perhaps be thinking of making the Church more acceptable by disestablishing the monarchy.

That was the great fear, remember, of James I, when he explained to his son, Charles Stewart, why he was crushing the puritans, who were demanding a disestablishment of the bishops. It's very simple son, he said, no bishop - no king. So let's remember, in this commemoration of Charles Bradlaugh, that he was a fervent and important republican, with his lectures on impeachment of the House of Brunswick, courageously raising his voice against the extravagance incompetence and corruption of those "costly puppets, useful only to the governing aristocracy as a cloak to shield the real wrongdoers", by which he meant the monopolists of land, industry and power in the Victorian age.

Socialism, however, was a bridge too far. He marched with the poor match girls in Victorian London, but his love of liberty made him cautious about boosting the power of the state. He just wanted it stripped of its illogical excrescences, beginning with the established Church and the established monarchy.

Well, I began by recalling the hypocritical hands laid on me by the archbishop all those years ago, and I interpreted the establishment of the Anglican Church as a consequence of the sex drive of a pathological monster, and I maintained, in passing, the problems with Mr Smythe and the latest damning report on the bishops' failure to safeguard their flock from the sexual appetites of those placed in spiritual power over them.

Has the Church of England learnt anything? It may be the most tolerant of religions, but is that saying very much? Their latest pastoral statement on civil partnerships, a year ago, says that sex outside marriage "falls short of God's purpose for human beings". They still don't get it, and they insult not only the LGBT community, but to most heterosexuals as well. No wonder that in 2019 fewer than 2% worship at their churches. And, as Roger Scruton said, sadly died, but nonetheless, "for most people now resident in England, the church is simply the empty gothic building at the end of the road, visited for the first time, if at all, when dead."

But really, the Church of England can be better than this, and disestablishment may give it the independence to redress and reconsider, and discover its true vocation. A guardian of 13,000 churches, 43 cathedrals, places that should be open to all who need a place of sanctuary, a place to think, to recover, to sort their minds out at a time when Covid 19 has turned their lives upside down. I could scarcely believe it when the Church of England rushed to lock up its churches in the first wave of lockdown. "Ink monitors to the establishment" said the Daily Mail, right for once. This is a time we need what the church can best provide: an opportunity for solace, some sanity beneath the steeple.

So I'm not hostile to the church, its sanctions, its sanctuaries, its inspiration, from Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* to Eliot's *Four Quartets* reminding us that: "So, while the light fails On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel History is now and England." That history, through history, will not be present in an anti-pageant coronation, that celebrates the follies of heredity and pomp and aristocracy.

Secularists, I suppose, can cudgel their brains, thinking how religions may repay the massive subsidies they receive from their tax-free charitable status. I've often thought, driving across England, dotted with landmarks of church spires, what a good idea it would be if to require churches to provide 24-hour public toilets beneath the steeple, so we'd know where to go when caught short. But I have a better, bigger idea, inspired by the history I've been looking up on the established church.

It's an idea for Rishi Sunak, faced, like Henry VIII, with a calamitous deficit. He should think of Cromwell, not Oliver, but Thomas, for whom the establishment of the Church of England provided the solution to the national debt. He dissolved the monasteries. The government should pay for Covid by dissolving the tax breaks in the church. Indeed of all churches, including, would you believe, the Church of Scientology and Moonies, which all receive them. The Church of England has an endowment of £9 billion, and they have the best financial advisors in the land who get them 10%, so they have a billion a year, tax free, from their investments alone, along with hundreds of millions each year from donations, hundreds of millions from the government for their schools, even £42 million from the government, from us, from the taxpayer, to replace the lead on their roofs and to keep their steeples standing. So the great wealth of the church awaits another Chancellor in his hour of need. If the church is to be part of the state, and it is, its funds should be available to the state for public benefit.

That's just another reason why the church itself should welcome disestablishment, so it can cherish its independence, keep, after paying tax, its money, and speak truth to power, without being part of that power. I don't think it will happen soon. We are the most apathetic of countries where our constitution is concerned. We don't even have a written one, we haven't got around to writing it down. The UK and Saudi Arabia are the only countries in the world without written constitution. We both have crown princes. At least ours is not a murderer.

I salute the NSS for keeping alive the memory of that courageous freethinker, Charles Bradlaugh, who made life easier for all of us, and, although I may despair at early reform, I offer the stoic consolation expressed by an early freethinker, John Lilburne, the Leveller, who said "Our cause and principles do through their own natural truth and luster, get ground in men's understandings, so that though we fail, our truths prosper and posterity, we doubt not, shall reap the benefit of our intents." Thank you for listening to me. I'm tempted to end tonight by saying "God save America" but, if Trump is re-elected, that, I think, would be the ultimate blasphemy. Thank you.

[Stephen Evans] Thank you Geoffrey. Thanks very much for that engaging and very colourful journey through religious privilege and establishment, which, as you say, began with the lust of a pathological monster, which is a line that I won't forget in a long time. Thanks also for risking the breach of the Treason Act of 1381 on our behalf. Thank you very much for that.

It's 8 30. I did promise we would finish at 8 30 and we're right on the dot, so, Geoffrey, it just remains for me to say a big thank you to you, for giving up your time, there's lots of other questions we haven't been able to answer but there's lots of comments as well saying how much people enjoyed it. So thank you ever so much, we really appreciate it.

And a big thank you to all of you for tuning in, and remember, if you do support the work of the National Secular Society, please do, if you're not already a member, nail your colours to the mast and do join us. We will put your principles into action. I hope you've enjoyed the lecture. That's all from us. Good night and thank you.