

Ep 38: Disestablishing the Church of England

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(Emma Park, EP): You're listening to the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park. Disestablishment of

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the Church of England has been an issue that the NSS has campaigned for since its foundation in the

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19th century. Disestablishment would involve separating the church entirely from the state

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including by removing the bishops from the House of Lords and removing the monarch's mandatory role

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as head of the Church of England. Every year the NSS hosts a speaker to give the Bradlaugh lecture

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in honour of the society's founder Charles Bradlaugh. This year the topic was disestablishment and the

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lecture was given, online of course, by Geoffrey Robertson QC - a human rights barrister and head

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of Doughty Street Chambers. Robertson's title was 'The Ultimate Blasphemy - Disestablishing

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the Church of England. You can access the full lecture on the website. In this podcast I'll be

speaking to the NSS's Stephen Evans to reflect on Robertson's argument and its implications

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for the Church of England, the monarchy and the rest of society in 21st century Britain.

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Stephen, first of all, how far do you think the NSS still keeps Bradlaugh's heritage alive today?

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(Stephen Evans, SE): Well it's a very important legacy and we do do our best to keep it alive.

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Bradlaugh is without question a really towering figure in British political history and we're

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very proud of our association with him - obviously we named our annual lecture after him and a few

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years ago we worked with the Parliamentary Arts Committee to commission a bust of Bradlaugh that

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now sits in the lower waiting hall in the Palace of Westminster which is just off central lobby,

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which is where the TV broadcasts all come from and that was funded by our members that

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can be seen uh, by whoever works in Parliament, whoever visits Parliament and certainly when

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I meet with peers and Members of Parliament, I do try and point this out to them. (EP): Geoffrey Robertson QC

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praised the NSS for keeping Charles Bradlaugh's memory alive. He outlined Bradlaugh's importance

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to the rule of law and democracy - in particular, in getting the Oaths Act 1888 passed. This act enabled

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non-religious MPs, jurors and witnesses to be able to affirm rather than taking an oath on the Bible.

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(SE): Obviously the Bradlaugh lecture was held online this year but in previous years

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we've held it at Manchester art gallery and in large part that's because a few years ago now we

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worked with the people there to restore and hang a magnificent portrait of Bradlaugh by Walter Sickert

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which is now on display in the gallery. So, you know, you can see we've done quite a lot I think in

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recent years to make sure Bradlaugh's contribution to Britain's political history isn't forgotten

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and if listeners do want to learn more about that, we tried to tell his story on our website

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and one of our directors, Bob Forder also last year created an educational program to explain and

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try and draw attention to secularist history and of course Bradlaugh features heavily there

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and he actually created a series of videos as well during the, the first uh, covid lockdown

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which we've uploaded to YouTube. It's a really interesting story and if listeners want to hear

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more about the story of Bradlaugh, then it's all out there. (EP): Great, um, moving on to the Church of

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England specifically, now Robertson argued that the C of E was actually founded by a man who was, according

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to the historian Tracy Borman, a pathological monster i.e. Henry VIII - who, as we all know, caused

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his whole country to break with the Catholic Church purely so that he could marry Anne Boleyn.

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(Geoffrey Robertson QC, GR): "Now, if you want to disestablish a national institution it seems to me only fair to look at

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the way it was established in the first place because obviously that should be a matter of

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national pride, a result of some moral or intellectual movement that should be

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specially remembered 500 years later - something in our history that we can cherish and applaud.

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Well, let's face it, the Church of England was established because of the lust of a pathological

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monster - that was how Henry VIII was described in The Times last week, as the evidence came to light

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of how he had planned to the last detail the grisly death of Anne Boleyn.

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The church and pro-church historians would have it believe, would have us believe

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that he was motivated by a desire to leave a son to rule England.

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The problem with that, firstly is that it endorses the view that women were so

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inferior they weren't up to snuff as rulers but he already had a perfectly good son by Bessie Blount

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who was lady's maid to Queen Catherine. It was, he was, he looked like Henry and was called the

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Duke of Richmond and was being groomed to take the throne if Henry failed to have a male heir

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but Henry, as we know, fell in love with Anne and as every schoolboy knows who's read his love letters,

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he wanted to slobber all over her little duckies and uh, in other words, to have sex with her and no

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doubt Anne did play him along for several years while Wolsey tried to obtain the pope's support

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for a divorce on the grounds that he'd married his deceased brother's wife and hadn't

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noticed it for 17 years. But uh, he was becoming desperate and doubtless held off I think until

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late, probably December 1532. He married her secretly in January 1533

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and the baby was due in September so it was Thomas Cromwell who engineered the establishment

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of the Church of England by an Act of Parliament called, uninspiringly,

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'An Act in Restraint of Appeals' - that's, that's the Church of England's beginning - an act in restraint

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of appeals. In other words, it abolished the Pope as the final appeal court for English ecclesiastical

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matters, including divorce. Now, okay there was a bit of 'Brexitteering' about this act by Cromwell -

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he played on nationalist sympathies, asserting in the statute that 'this realm of England is an empire'

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an independent sovereign state, independent of the Pope and that the king is supreme head of both

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the church and the state - that's where it all comes from - an act in restraint of appeals. Well a few

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weeks later in May, Cranmer dissolved his marriage with Catherine - five days later the secret marriage

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with Anne was announced and she was crowned as queen. For those six months of course, he'd be

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living bigamously with two wives but uh when the news reached Rome the Pope of course

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excommunicated him and the Church of England was born. As Roger Scruton says,

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honestly, I quote, 'much of it following the curious logic of Henry's hormones' "

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(EP): There are some interesting parallels there with Brexit. Robertson also argued that the Church

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of England today is compromised by its close associations with the government, for example,

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the power to appoint bishops still rests with the Prime Minister. As Robertson also noted, the

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present government hastily threatened the Church with disestablishment when some of the bishops

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opposed the internal market bill - the proposed Brexit legislation that breaks international law -

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but anyway, Stephen what do you think? Does the government's reaction to the bishops

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who dared to oppose the internal market bill prove that the Church of England is only tolerated so

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long as it does not dare to oppose the government.
(SE): Um, well! yeah, yes, certainly the bishops have been

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quite vocal on Brexit. I'm not sure the government quite threatened the church with disestablishment

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when its bishops oppose the internal market bill a few weeks back um, but yes, their, their

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status was certainly used by government ministers and MPs to um, put the bishops back in their box,

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shall we say, um and as I think, I, I think the established church

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does walk a fine line when it decides to intervene in political affairs of the day

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and I think that's why some people within the church would actually rather be unshackled from

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the state to enable them to speak out a little bit more freely than they do perhaps right now.

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(GR): "For most people now resident in England the church is simply the empty gothic building

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at the end of the road visited for the first time, if at all, when dead. But really the Church

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of England can be better than this and disestablishment may give it the independence

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to redress and reconsider and discover its true vocation - a guardian of 13,000 churches,

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43 cathedrals - places that should be open to all who need a place of sanctuary, a place to think

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to recover, to sort their minds out at a time when Covid 19 has turned their lives upside down"

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(SE): And of course they should be free to speak out. What I object to, and what the NSS objects to is the

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privileged platform they enjoy to speak out from. So, I'm obviously talking about their law-making

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role for example, cluttering up the House of Lords with 26 seats. The Church of England

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is a very political beast so I think religious privilege does amount to political privilege too

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which I don't think is healthy for democracy and I don't see why their interests should be

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given any more or less weight than the interest of any other special interest group.

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(EP): Roberston made the provocative point that Rishi Sunak ought to consider disestablishing the C of E today

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in order to avail itself of the church's nine billion pound endowment or at least to relieve

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it of its charitable status and other financial privileges that are still funded by the taxpayer.

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(GR): "Secularists I suppose can cudgel their brains thinking how religions may repay the massive

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subsidies they receive from their tax-free charitable status. I've often thought driving

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across England dotted with landmarks of church spires, what a good idea it would be if, to

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require churches to provide 24-hour public toilets beneath the steeple so we'd know where to go

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when caught short, but I have a better, bigger idea inspired by the history I've been looking up - the

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established church - it's an idea for Rishi Sunak faced like Henry VIII with a calamitous deficit - he

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should think of Cromwell - not Oliver but Thomas for whom the establishment of the Church of England

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provided the solution to the national debt - he dissolved the monasteries and the government

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should pay for covid by dissolving the tax breaks in the church, indeed of all churches

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including, would you believe, the church of scientology, moonies which all receive them"

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(EP): Do you think that the C of E's great

wealth should be redistributed

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and given back to the people?

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(SE): Well, if you look at how the church's riches were amassed uh, there may be an argument for that but actually far from the church handing money

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over to the state it's actually the state that often funnels money into the church - the the state

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fully funds the running of Church of England schools for example

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but it also hands over millions of pounds to maintain churches - repairs that the church

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could absolutely afford to pay for itself but it would rather spend its wealth and its considerable

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wealth it has to be said, on evangelism. So the public in many ways actually subsidises the

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church's evangelism which is outrageous um and, you know, that a wealthy church taps the hard-pressed

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state for cash when it already has significant wealth of its own is, I think, ethically dubious.

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So, anyway we're more interested I think in ending the state funding of the church than uh

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redistributing the church wealth.

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(EP): Maybe that's a less drastic step. (SE): I think so - somewhat less provocative.

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(EP): Robertson also gave a very moving and indeed chilling account of the way that the Church of

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England, like some other religious organizations, has had a history of covering up child abuse.

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(GR): "..... and only a fortnight ago of course we have the independent inquiry into child abuse which uh

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found our national church was guilty of covering up child abuse in order to protect its reputation

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and its finances. These bishops - they are bishops - are given a privileged place in our legislature -

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26 privileged places as Lords Spiritual with the Lords Temporal crowding in the House of Lords.

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And uh, so would we miss them if the church was disestablished? I don't think so. We haven't

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missed the blasphemy law and we wouldn't miss the 26 privileged places in a disestablished

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church. The church has been disestablished in Wales - back in 1920. The church of Scotland isn't

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really established because it doesn't want any links with government, quite rightly.

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So the Church of England is unique in all religions in clinging to these links with the state.

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This is not just giving Caesar his due but allowing Caesar to walk all over you

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should he choose and what church with any integrity would allow that -

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to be run by the state and allow its bishops and archbishops to be appointed by the Prime Minister?

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The Church of England is really in the hands of the state - not that the state bothers very much to

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interfere - Mrs Thatcher did a few times on choices of bishops but they're a pretty subservient lot

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these days and although I must say that Rowan Williams who is a considerable mind alone with

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the bishops, has said disestablishment would give the church a certain integrity. How right he is and

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how the church lacks integrity by its truckling to state control, even if that control is rarely used"

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(EP): Do you think that this is a completely separate issue from disestablishment or, has being the

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established church, given the Church of England more leverage or more reason to cover up abuse?

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(SE): Well, I certainly don't think it's ideal for the state to be so closely aligned with an

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organization that's been found by the independent inquiry on child sex abuse to have covered up

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child sexual abuse, to have given abusers a place to hide and actually offered them much

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more in the way of support than they have done to the victims of child sex abuse. Certainly it

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undermines any argument that the church provides any sort of moral leadership to the country but

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I think few people have really ever bought into that argument anyway um and if you look at the

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moral issues of the day - assisted dying, same-sex marriage, legal equality for LGBT people - the church

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clearly lags behind the public, largely I think because it's moral compass is so often clouded by

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religious teachings or dogma but if we do go back to that link that you suggested between

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establishment and child abuse, I think the Church of England's status as the

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established church has in some ways contributed uh, to its desire to and maybe its ability to

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cover up abuse and leave victims completely bereft of justice. Just go back and look at the case

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of Peter Ball. So, he was a former bishop, a bishop of Lewes in Gloucester I think, who evaded

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justice for years thanks largely to what I would describe as an establishment cover-up. So, when he

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first faced allegations of sexual offences back in 1993 we had the likes of Prince Charles and

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other members of the establishment rallying behind him and backing his campaign to return to ministry

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unrestricted so he was effectively at the time let off with a caution.

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Um, it was only I think 20 or so years later that he was eventually charged and jailed for sexual

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offences against young men - I think 18 young men in the end and in the meantime one of his victims

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Neil Todd who made the first allegation of abuse against Ball back in '93 attempted suicide three

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times and actually went on to kill himself back in 2012 and if you just look at that case, I think the

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deference towards church figures and the status of being established and the royal connections and the

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rest of it, I think it contributed to the problem of cover-ups within the Church of England. So,

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to go back to your question, I guess no, it ,it's not a completely separate issue

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from disestablishment and certainly the church's record should be taken into

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consideration I think when we consider whether we still want it to be the national church.

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(EP): Blasphemy was finally abolished in England and Wales through the 2008 criminal justice

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and immigration act under the Labour government. Is there a danger that it might sneak back into

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the law here under another name, as it may also be able to do in Scotland through the hate crime bill?

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(SE): Well, yes, we always need to be vigilant I think when it comes to protecting free speech - it's a

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fundamental freedom that I don't think we see enough people defending these days.

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If we just look recently many people's reaction to the terrorist atrocities in France was to almost blame

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free speech in cartoons that certain sections of the public found offensive. You know, it's sort of,

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we saw this sort of uh, victim blaming as if anyone who defends the important civil liberties of free

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speech, uh tolerance, uh freedom of religion even has it coming and this, this sort of fanciful

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and dangerous idea that 'anything for a quiet life' but of course giving into fundamentalist

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demands to respect their religion never leads to anything like a quiet life, it just leads to

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ever more unrealistic, unreasonable demands and I think there is an element of that in Scotland's

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hate crime bill that people should have their feelings protected in some way but of course

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the good thing about Scotland's hate crime bill is it will be the bill that abolishes the offence of

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blasphemy if it goes through but certainly other aspects of the bill will, I suppose, effectively

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reintroduce a sort of blasphemy law by bringing in these new, controversial, very vague

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stirring-up-of-hatred offences which could potentially at least criminalise speech about religion that

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people find insulting, offensive or abusive which, you know, is, is itself a very subjective term.

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So certainly the law in England and Wales at the moment explicitly protects expressions of dislike,

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antipathy, ridicule and abuse of religious ideas and so in Scotland we're campaigning to ensure

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that the Scottish bill does that too otherwise yes, I think free speech around religion will certainly

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be chilled and in some cases criminalised. (EP): So in other words um, it will be counterproductive.

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(SE): Well that's the thing about trying to silence ideas that you disagree with -

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it is usually counterproductive and it doesn't do anything to aid social cohesion so, however

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well-intentioned this bill is, I do ultimately think it's going to be counterproductive.

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(GR): " I made quite a good living out of advising as an expert on blasphemy - I was hired by the

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British Board of Film Censors for an opinion on whether the 'Life of Brian' was blasphemous

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and they should stop it. I said it wasn't because of course Brian was not the Messiah, he was a very

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naughty boy and then I was retained to advise on the Hollywood movie 'The Last Temptation of Christ'

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after the Gay News trial judge a dreadful bloke called King Hamilton had written to the times

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- he hadn't seen the film of course but he demanded that it be prosecuted because he'd heard that it

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was scurrilous. I saw it, I didn't find it, I thought, the only scurrilous thing about it

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was that Christ and his disciples were all played by Americans while Judas and the devil and all the

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baddies spoke with English accents. But the end of blasphemy came as a result of the

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Ayatollah Khomeini who pronounced in 1988 a fatwa on Salman Rushdie for writing 'The Satanic Verses'.

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Salman had to go into hiding and a group of Muslim barristers

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had the bright idea of trying to flush him out by serving a summons for both blasphemy and sedition.

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They relied on Lord Scarman's unwise words about blasphemy being able to extend to all

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religions. The magistrate threw the case out on the basis you could only blaspheme

0:24:22.000,0:24:31.840

against the Anglican church so they took their forensic jihad to the high court.

0:24:33.680,0:24:38.640

(EP): Now, the argument that Geoffrey Robertson himself considered the most important in favor of

0:24:38.640,0:24:44.160

disestablishing the Church of England concerns its relationship with the monarchy. This is

0:24:44.160,0:24:49.360

particularly, particularly important now because of the probability that Prince Charles may become

0:24:49.360,0:24:54.160

king or is going to become king in the not too distant future. Now I should say at this point

0:24:54.160,0:25:00.640

that under the treason act 1351, as mentioned by Geoffrey Robertson, treason includes, quote:

0:25:00.640,0:25:07.200

'when a man doth compass or imagine the death of our lord the king', unquote. So following Robertson's

0:25:07.200,0:25:12.880

lead, in order to avoid any charge of treason and possible execution, let's just consider a situation

0:25:12.880,0:25:18.880

in which her majesty remains in the best of health but decides to abdicate in Charles's favor. If that

0:25:18.880,0:25:24.800

happens and he becomes king, he will have to swear a coronation oath. In its traditional format, the

0:25:24.800,0:25:29.520

coronation oath will require him to defend the rights and privileges of the Church of England but

0:25:29.520,0:25:34.080

not, as Robertson argued, to serve the people as a whole regardless of their beliefs or lack of them.

0:25:36.160,0:25:44.000

(GR): Then of course there's the phenomenon that John Mortimer and I encountered when waiting to argue the

0:25:44.000,0:25:50.720

Gay News blasphemy case - the daily prayers from the book of common prayer in the Bible,

0:25:51.840,0:25:59.760

said by bishops every day on a daily rota. Why is it thought that a reading from the

0:25:59.760,0:26:09.200

apostle will inspire MPs to argue about Brexit? Not only is it a waste of parliamentary time

0:26:09.200,0:26:17.280

and a snub to those with no Anglican faith or no faith at all and it's incompatible

0:26:17.280,0:26:24.240

with the democratic ideal of separation of church and the state but it's bloody annoying

0:26:24.960,0:26:34.560

because for an MP to reserve a seat at Prime Minister's question time, he or she has to put

0:26:34.560,0:26:43.280

down a green card promising, indicating that they'll attend prayers at the start of the day -

0:26:44.080,0:26:51.840

it forces MPs to listen to prayers if they want to ask questions of the Prime Minister.

0:26:53.040,0:26:59.600

Its defenders say it's there to promote morality in Parliament although that's an argument that's

0:26:59.600,0:27:08.480

difficult to sustain. In the recent years the bishops block, as I would call it, has rejected

0:27:08.480,0:27:15.680

a number of legislative initiatives mostly

to do with cutting down on church privileges.

0:27:16.880,0:27:26.400

They're wholly unrepresentative even of their own flock being mainly male and white middle class

0:27:27.120,0:27:34.000

and far from promoting morality, they've been hostile to women's rights. First

0:27:34.560,0:27:42.240

they held out against women bishops until 2015, they've been unanimously opposing

0:27:42.880,0:27:52.960

same-sex marriage and the decriminalisation of assisted suicide. So, it's no answer, though

0:27:53.520,0:28:00.640

too often it's the answer which is given, that we should create places for leaders of

0:28:01.360,0:28:09.920

other religions far less progressive even than our own bishops. I don't want to get into

0:28:09.920,0:28:17.520

the vexed question of House of Lords reform but surely its members should be

0:28:17.520,0:28:26.240

appointed on their own merits rather than as placemen of an official church.

0:28:28.640,0:28:33.200

(EP): Stephen, what in your view is likely to happen when Charles is crowned? Is there enough political

0:28:33.200,0:28:38.800

will to change the coronation oath and make it more appropriate to 21st century Britain?

0:28:38.800,0:28:44.960

(SE): Well, I imagine there will be some changes, certainly to the ceremony - I think that will be a much

0:28:44.960,0:28:50.640
much more scaled down affair than the coronation of '53. Certainly there'll be fewer people there

0:28:50.640,0:28:55.360
and not so much in the way of street processions and the rest of it but as for the oath itself, well

0:28:55.360,0:28:59.440
I'm not, I'm not so sure. As I understand it, there's a group of grandees working at the moment under the

0:28:59.440,0:29:04.960
name of, uh the code name, operation golden orb which is apparently responsible for planning

0:29:04.960,0:29:09.760
Charles's coronation but I, I certainly don't have any insight into their deliberations at the moment.

0:29:10.560,0:29:15.840
Of course, the coronation usually takes place several months after the death of the previous

0:29:15.840,0:29:21.600
monarch uh, or let's say when they assume the role uh, let's say through abdication

0:29:21.600,0:29:28.240
um so there will be some time for a national debate as to what should happen um but in fact I,

0:29:28.240,0:29:31.760
I don't think you even need to hold the coronation - I think most of the European monarchies have

0:29:31.760,0:29:37.280

abandoned coronations in favor of inauguration or enthronement ceremonies which could of

0:29:37.280,0:29:43.040
course take place in the more secular Westminster Hall rather than Westminster Abbey but if there

0:29:43.040,0:29:48.400
is to be a coronation, I think it will be very interesting to see how it's received because one

0:29:48.400,0:29:54.800
of the most significant changes since the queen was crowned back in 1953 is this sharp decline

0:29:54.800,0:30:00.880
in adherence to Christianity and the, you know, the, the broader secularisation that's happened

0:30:00.880,0:30:09.120
in the UK because the religious landscape of Britain is very different to the Britain of 1953 and

0:30:09.120,0:30:13.920
I imagine that the coronation will feel quite alien to much of the population who don't go to

0:30:13.920,0:30:20.000
church because it is a very Anglican ceremony and certainly if it follows previous ceremonies, as you

0:30:20.000,0:30:25.040
say, King Charles will be crowned and anointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury in a big church,

0:30:26.160,0:30:31.040
Charles will take the ascension oath in which he swears to maintain and preserve the settlement

0:30:31.040,0:30:36.080
of the Church of England, so basically
promising to maintain their privileges and

0:30:36.080,0:30:41.440
um it, it, I think it's going to look a little
bit strange. The UK is the only democracy

0:30:41.440,0:30:46.960
to have such an explicitly Christian ceremony
for its head of state. Um, it'll certainly be
more

0:30:46.960,0:30:52.800
multi-faith - we'll have the usual array of faith
leaders and belief leaders there but
nevertheless

0:30:53.440,0:30:58.960
all of the religious rituals will probably, I
imagine, be quite jarring and quite alienating
to

0:31:00.000,0:31:06.240
a British public that really isn't interested
in church services uh, largely isn't Christian

0:31:06.240,0:31:13.840
uh, predominantly isn't religious and I think it
will probably highlight a real disconnect
between

0:31:13.840,0:31:19.680
the monarchy and the British public. (EP)
Robertson suggested that this difficulty with
the coronation

0:31:19.680,0:31:24.240
and, and the coronation oath in particular, um
raises the more fundamental question of
whether

0:31:24.240,0:31:30.000
it is time to disestablish not only the church
but the monarchy. He mentioned James I's
advice

0:31:30.000,0:31:35.280
to his son - who would go on to be Charles I -
now James I said "no bishop, no king".

0:31:36.000,0:31:41.120
Do some of the criticisms of the Church of
England apply in your view, equally to the
British monarchy?

0:31:41.120,0:31:45.600
What would be left of the monarchy without
the church? (SE): Well yes, I think the fate of
the monarchy

0:31:45.600,0:31:50.320
may well be tied up with the fate of the
church - they are arguably all part and parcel
of the same

0:31:50.320,0:31:56.000
thing. The monarch is, the monarchy is a sort
of quasi-religious institution and so I think the

0:31:56.000,0:32:01.840
next coronation, as I was saying, will, will be
the beginning of the end possibly for the
monarchy.

0:32:02.720,0:32:07.280
Popularity of the monarchy is very much tied
up with the popularity of the queen but no

0:32:07.280,0:32:11.760
future monarch can expect that level of
support, certainly not king Charles and
without the queen

0:32:11.760,0:32:17.040
I think the whole thing does start to look a
little more precarious. Of course, at the NSS
we

0:32:17.040,0:32:22.800
don't actively campaign for abolition of the
monarchy - our members quite reasonably, I
think,

0:32:22.800,0:32:27.440

may hold varying positions on that question but it's certainly hard to envisage a

0:32:27.440,0:32:31.840
monarchy surviving under a secular state where religious privilege is removed and if the reforms

0:32:32.400,0:32:37.520
were brought forward to disestablish the church, I think the question of the monarchy would almost

0:32:37.520,0:32:43.680
certainly need to be addressed too. All I would say is, is that if we are to retain a monarch or

0:32:43.680,0:32:49.280
any head of state, certainly that role should be entirely secular. Any future monarch or any future

0:32:49.280,0:32:54.080
head of state should be free to follow any personal faith or none that they wish and it certainly

0:32:54.080,0:32:59.840
shouldn't be their role to defend the interests of the protestant Christian faith. (EP): Just one final

0:32:59.840,0:33:04.720
question - Robertson suggested that the impetus to disestablish would come not from Parliament

0:33:04.720,0:33:09.680
but it would be more likely to come from the Church of England itself. Now, neither the Tories

0:33:09.680,0:33:14.160
nor Labour have disestablishment on their manifesto although I believe the Lib Dems do.

0:33:14.800,0:33:19.440
Do you think it's likely that the Church of

England will disestablish itself any time soon?

0:33:19.440,0:33:24.000
(SE): Well it's fair to say that disestablishment isn't particularly high up the political agenda

0:33:24.000,0:33:29.440
right now but we are in a situation where only a small fraction of the population are affiliated to

0:33:29.440,0:33:35.840
the church so it's certainly incongruous - the current settlement that we have and not very

0:33:35.840,0:33:40.240
helpful either though I don't think to fostering any sort of inclusive national identity so I think

0:33:40.240,0:33:45.760
separating church and state would be a really positive step towards making Britain look and feel

0:33:46.800,0:33:52.480
like a more egalitarian and equal state where all of us, all citizens regardless of our religion or

0:33:52.480,0:33:59.200
belief or race can feel like equal citizens so I think the state church gets in the way of that, so

0:33:59.200,0:34:02.800
I think there's something very positive to be said about disestablishment but

0:34:02.800,0:34:07.200
coming back to your question, which is a good one, about the church's attitude to disestablishment,

0:34:08.400,0:34:12.480
I don't think disestablishment should be seen as something to be done to the church

0:34:12.480,0:34:17.200

but something that the church could actually be a willing partner in. It's interesting to

0:34:17.200,0:34:25.840

see the Church of Ireland at the moment currently celebrating 150 years of disestablishment and they

0:34:25.840,0:34:30.800

very much see it as a period of liberation - they're framing it very much as a positive as

0:34:30.800,0:34:34.560

independence from the state that gave them the freedom to shape their future.

0:34:34.560,0:34:40.000

(EP): When they were disestablished, I mean Ireland was sort of technically part of the British empire

0:34:40.000,0:34:45.440

then so perhaps it was, you know, part of their sort of process of liberating themselves from Britain,

0:34:45.440,0:34:45.940

British rule.

0:34:45.940,0:34:57.920

(SE): There was definitely a, um, a different set of circumstances that led up to disestablishment for sure in Ireland as there was in Wales, but if we look back I mean right in The Times back in 18,

0:34:57.920,0:35:03.040

sorry 1989 the religious commentator Clifford Longley said "any Christian church that still

0:35:03.040,0:35:08.800

needs official state privilege for support has chosen to manacle itself to a spiritual corpse.

0:35:08.800,0:35:14.160

In their heart everyone knows it but no one will admit it" now clifford longley was a Roman Catholic

0:35:14.160,0:35:19.360

but I think this view does exist too within the Church of England, certainly Rowan Williams the

0:35:19.360,0:35:24.800

former Archbishop of Canterbury, he once argued that, I think he said, there was a certain integrity

0:35:24.800,0:35:30.720

to a church that's free from the state and various Anglican theologians make that same argument too,

0:35:30.720,0:35:36.000

so that school of thought - that disestablishment could be seen as liberation and freedom, I think

0:35:36.000,0:35:40.960

that very much exists within the Church of England but at the same time of course those who benefit

0:35:40.960,0:35:46.160

from religious establishment will instinctively I suppose cling to it, not least the bishops whose

0:35:46.160,0:35:52.000

seats in the House of Lords give them considerable political lobbying power and prestige but, you know,

0:35:52.000,0:35:57.040

we look at the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, he's, he's, sort of hedging his bets

0:35:57.040,0:36:01.680

by saying that disestablishment wouldn't be a disaster but he did say the removal of privileges

0:36:01.680,0:36:06.800

should be a decision for Parliament and people and I think that's probably right. Ultimately the state

0:36:06.800,0:36:12.160

could act unilaterally and disestablish the church but, you know, we all know the way these things work

0:36:12.160,0:36:17.200

and disestablishment, when it happens, and I think it will happen but when it happens, I think

0:36:17.200,0:36:22.160

it probably will need the church to acquiesce but as I say it's the right thing to do. I think

0:36:22.160,0:36:27.360

it would better reflect who we are as a, as a nation so yes, it's something that should happen

0:36:28.160,0:36:34.320

and certainly a church that very few British citizens have any relationship with shouldn't

0:36:34.320,0:36:39.040

stand in the way in that because it's right as a matter of democratic principle that no religion

0:36:39.040,0:36:44.960

should be favored over and above any other religion or belief and I think eventually the

0:36:44.960,0:36:50.800

church will come round to that idea too.
(EP): Stephen Evans, thank you very much.
(SE): Thank you.

0:36:50.800,0:36:53.840

0:36:59.200,0:37:03.680

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