

GOD AND CAESAR, THEN AND NOW

by Dr N. T. Wright, Canon Theologian, Westminster Abbey
(from June 30 2003: Bishop of Durham)

‘Render unto Caesar,’ declared Jesus, ‘the things that are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.’¹ That famously cryptic comment serves not only as a title for this article but as a reminder of the question-mark that hangs over life in an established church, not least in that most established of churches, Westminster Abbey. Having served under Wesley Carr and experienced the joys and puzzles, the stresses and opportunities which the intermingling of Church and State produce, I am delighted to offer these reflections in gratitude for his brave leadership and wise collegiality.

How, today, should we approach the question of God and Caesar – of Christ, church, crown and state? To answer, I shall first outline some current assumptions, and suggest that they are currently challenged from within contemporary culture itself. Then I shall suggest that the biblical basis for the topic is more solid and multi-faceted than normally imagined. Finally, I shall argue for a way of understanding church, state and crown in our own day.

1. The Legacy of the Enlightenment

I begin by drawing attention to three influential features of Enlightenment thought which are taken for granted today.

The first is the assumption of a split-level world in which ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ belong upstairs and ‘society’ and ‘politics’ belong downstairs. This assumption has effectively privatized religion and faith on the one hand, and on the other has emancipated politics from divine control or influence. God lives upstairs (many of the Enlightenment philosophers were Deists) and doesn’t bother about what goes on downstairs. Our modern word ‘state’ is itself an Enlightenment invention, designating a self-operating system, free from religious influence. Thus even to phrase the question in terms of ‘church and state’ may run the risk of deciding things in advance.

Many today assume this split-level world as the norm. Indeed, when people hear Jesus’ ‘God-and-Caesar’ line from Mark 12, they assume that it affirms and legitimates this divide. That is why many assume, further, that any link between church and state must be ill-conceived. Surely, they think, we are now a *secular* society? Surely a church-state link belongs with witchcraft and superstition, with Crusades and prince-bishops? Surely – one of the favourite lines in Enlightenment rhetoric – it’s *mediaeval*?²

Well, it is and it isn’t. This brings us to the second Enlightenment assumption often taken for granted today: that political beliefs and attitudes come in two packages, and that everyone has to choose one or the other. There is the package of the Right: rigid social structures, hierarchy, law and order, a tough-minded work ethic and a strong view of national identity. Then there is the package of the Left: freedom and revolution, overthrowing hierarchies, blurring old lines, doing

¹Mark 12.17 and parallels.

²See Bradley (cited below) 143.

things in new ways. It is assumed that, with local variations, you are basically in one camp or the other, and that many other decisions are determined by it. In America many assume that if you believe in God and the Bible you are also opposed to gun control and in favour of the death penalty – or that if you believe in abolishing the death penalty and introducing gun control you probably doubt the incarnation and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The packages vary from one country to another, but it is assumed that political beliefs line up on one side or the other and that a recognisable package will be held in common on either side. It is also often assumed (this, too, was part of Enlightenment rhetoric) that the church, and belief in God, are part of the right-wing package. The more democratic, let alone revolutionary, you become, the less you will have to do with God.

Things are not that easy, but old assumptions stick hard. The very idea of Left and Right dates only to the French Revolution. Those who have discovered in our own day that Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, and that Paul spoke of Jesus as the world's true Lord, often assume that this implies some variation on today's left-wing package, just as for generations people who have discovered that Paul insists on obeying 'the powers that be' have assumed that this implies some kind of right-wing package. This too is anachronistic; but it explains why many today look at the combination of God, church, crown and state and declare that it's all part of a right-wing conspiracy and must be got rid of; or, if they understand the New Testament as supporting a left-wing package, that God and the church are hopelessly compromised by having anything at all to do with crown and state and must be set free at once.³

The third influential Enlightenment assumption, which affects how people see the other two as well, is the belief in progress. History (it is believed) reached a climax in Europe in the eighteenth century; humanity's calling ever since has been to implement this achievement. If recalcitrant elements in earlier worldviews have proved harder to shift than the early revolutionaries had imagined, they must be mocked or shamed into giving themselves up. Surely, we are told, 'in this day and age' certain things are inappropriate? Surely 'now that we live in the twenty-first century' it's time to get rid of some types of social organisation or constitution? The assumption here is that everyone 'really' knows that the undoubted advances in science and technology have made older religious and political beliefs redundant, banishing God upstairs on the one hand and redefining politics into Left and Right, with a strong inclination towards some kind of egalitarian, one-level social democracy.

The Enlightenment agenda is of course far more complicated than this, but I hope these three aspects are recognisable. The achievement of the Enlightenment was to shape the way people think and feel so thoroughly that many today unquestioningly assume these radical innovations. This is simply part of 'living in the modern world'.

But just when the Enlightenment empire sits back and surveys its achievement, the Goths and Vandals are at the gates. Postmodernity, growing up within the western world over the last generation, has challenged every aspect of the Enlightenment package. Things are again more complex than we can explore here; I simply sketch, in reverse order, some of the effects of the current revolution against the modernist assumptions.⁴

Belief in progress has been under attack, not least politically. 'Progress' has been often associated with the Left, but in the more radical post-war Left, especially in France, 'progress' itself has been accused of being a covert excuse for imperial domination. The word *developed*,

³See, e.g., the essays edited by Richard A. Horsley in the two volumes *Paul and Empire* and *Paul and Politics* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997 and 2000).

⁴On the postmodern turn see my book *The Myth of the Millennium* (London: SPCK, 1999), and e.g. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be* (London: SPCK, 1998).

and its little sister, *under-developed*, encapsulate the position now under threat from postcolonialism. Belief in ‘progress’ has enabled western modernists to trample over much of the world in search of wealth and power, just as belief in ‘Roman justice’ excused Caesar’s first-century imperialism.

Likewise, belief in our own political right-and-left alternatives as a one-size-fits-all map is hard to sustain. Western parliamentary-style democracy is only one of several options that different societies find appropriate. ‘Democracy’ means something different in the UK from what it means in America and the different European countries. We whose histories include rotten boroughs and beer-for-votes rallies should not be surprised at how difficult it is to stage one-person-one-vote elections in many parts of the world today. Fewer people voted in the last UK election than in the ‘Big Brother’ TV series. We are not in a wonderful position from which to offer the rest of the world a permanent political solution. Anyway, the Enlightenment didn’t only produce democracies. It also produced Napoleon, Bismark, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin.

In particular, the western world has become disillusioned with secular modernism, the child of Enlightenment Deism. We may have banished the older image of God upstairs, leaving him there to mumble in his beard while we run the world by ourselves, but theology like nature abhors a vacuum, and new gods have been bubbling up from below to replace the absentee landlord. New Age movements, Druids, Shamans, crystals and horoscopes: the ‘religion’ section in any bookshop will reveal that ‘spirituality’ is big business. The spiritual starvation diet offered by secularism made people so hungry that they now eat anything. People are rediscovering their awareness of something or someone they call God, or ‘the divine’, not least in and through symbols, rituals, and stories. People speak eagerly of ‘mystery’, ‘magic’, or ‘other dimensions’ – all things which the Enlightenment tried to ban as mumbo-jumbo and superstition. Some still try to enforce that ban, but mystery has come back to our lives, and we like it and won’t be put off. The question now facing us is: How should we put God and the world back together again after an artificial divorce of two centuries? That we must do so is increasingly apparent. And all this means that the cultural assumptions within which the God/church/crown/state debates have traditionally been conducted have been eroded.

2. The Kingdoms of the World and the Kingdom of God

This brings us to the foundational question: what does the New Testament say on the whole subject? Above the High Altar in Westminster Abbey are inscribed words from Revelation 11.15: ‘The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.’⁵ This is typical of what the New Testament declares: God is king, and the kingdoms of the world are thereby demoted. The crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth is God’s Messiah, Lord of the world; he is already reigning at God’s right hand; he will reappear to complete this rule by abolishing all enemies, including sin and death themselves.⁶

This early Christian belief goes back, through Jesus himself, to the ancient Jewish world. Throughout that world, both Jewish and Christian, the assumptions of the Enlightenment simply do not hold. God and the world are not separated by an ugly ditch; the political options are not polarised along the lines of authority versus revolution; and, though history does indeed move

⁵Actually, the inscribed text has made the ‘kingdoms’ plural; in the Greek the word is singular, and only occurs once in the sentence (literally, ‘the kingdom of this world is become of our lord and of his Messiah’).

⁶The classic statement is in 1 Corinthians 15.20-28.

towards a great climax and then out to implement this in the world, this has nothing to do with automatic progress and everything to do with sacrifice, vocation and the strange purposes of the living God.

The story of how this works out is far too long to tell here. In many periods of Christian history the Israelite monarchy was invoked as the model for Christian kings and queens; but in the Old Testament itself kingship is ambiguous, and hardly supports a triumphalist use. In any case, the really formative period for Jewish political thinking, the period which set the tone for the New Testament, was during and after the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah urged the exiles to seek the welfare of Babylon, and to pray to God for it.⁷ God, he declared, had raised up his servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and given him authority over all the nations.⁸ Second Isaiah spoke of the pagan Persian Cyrus as God's anointed, who would rescue the exiles and send them home.⁹ The exiles rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple under the ambivalent auspices of pagan rulers. Despite some prophetic hopes, no Davidic king emerged to create a new, independent kingdom. Instead, Jewish writers from the exile to Jesus and beyond wrestle with the ambiguities of living as God's people under non-Jewish rule. Two books stand out.

Daniel tells stories of Jews who refuse to compromise with paganism. When they are vindicated by God, however, they (like Joseph under Pharaoh) are promoted to positions of service within the pagan kingdom. Jews may face martyrdom (not least because they refuse to privatize their faith), but they are committed to being good citizens even under a regime at best penultimate and at worst blasphemous. Of course, there comes a time when the true God will judge the pagans, and then God's people must get out and run.¹⁰ There will come a time when all regimes, including the one within which Daniel is a loyal civil servant, will give way to the kingdom that God will set up, which can never be shaken.¹¹ Combining apocalyptic visions of God's coming kingdom and public service within the present one appears shocking to the Enlightenment mindset. But something like this is what we find in the New Testament and the early church.

The Wisdom of Solomon offers a stern warning to pagan kings and rulers. They have been appointed to their high office by the living God, but he will judge them for what they do and fail to do. They therefore need Wisdom, who has been active throughout Israel's traditions, and who (we gradually discover) is more or less an *alter ego* for God himself.¹² This is not the *absent* God of Enlightenment Deism; it is the wise, guiding, judging, rescuing God of the biblical tradition. This God does not divide the world between right and left, authority and revolution. Both of those are too brightly lit, too unambiguous, to be ultimately useful in guiding our steps in the right paths. Wisdom herself proposes a different way.

Some Jews, of course, took more extreme positions. Some sought to ape the pagan kings; the Hasmonean dynasty went that route, as did Herod and his sons. Equally, there was a long tradition of revolt, from the Maccabees to Bar-Kochba, sometimes using the slogan 'No King but

⁷Jeremiah 29.7.

⁸Jeremiah 27.4-8.

⁹Isaiah 45.1-7; cf. 2 Chronicles 36.22f.; Ezra 1.1-4.

¹⁰Isaiah 52.11-12; cf. 48.20; Jeremiah 50.8; 51.6, 45; Zech 2.6, 7.

¹¹Daniel 2; 7; 9.

¹²Wisdom 6.1-11.

God'.¹³ But when Jesus of Nazareth announced that God's kingdom was breaking in, he seems not to have meant it in that sense. What was he talking about? How did Jesus' vision of God's kingdom stand in relation to the kingdoms of the world?

From the start, Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom was fighting talk.¹⁴ Everybody knew that God's kingdom didn't refer to a place, perhaps a place called 'heaven', where God ruled and to which God's people would be gathered, well away from the wicked world, at the end of their lives. Only a Deist could think like that. God's kingdom, said Jesus, was coming, and people should pray for it to come, *on earth as in heaven*; and here he was, on earth, making it happen before people's very eyes. When Herod heard, he was angry; he was King of the Jews, and rival claimants tended not to live long. When the Chief Priests heard, they knew that it meant a challenge to their power base, the Temple. If Caesar had heard, he would have reacted similarly. What none of them could figure out, and what even Jesus' closest associates had difficulty understanding, was what *kind* of a challenge Jesus intended to pose: what sort of a kingdom he was advancing, and what kind of a king he considered himself to be.

The answers begin to emerge when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and symbolically purges the Temple, pointing ahead to its imminent destruction. This precipitates a string of debates, in which Jesus is virtually on trial, like someone being interviewed by a hostile media knowing that any verbal slip might prove fatal. Mark 11 and 12 offer a sequence of these debates, all of them politically and theologically freighted. This is where we find the trick question, and the opaque answer, about the tribute penny, about Caesar and God. It is not an isolated 'political' comment in an otherwise nonpolitical sequence of thought. It fits exactly where it is.¹⁵

Tax revolts against Rome were nothing new. A large-scale one had taken place during Jesus' boyhood, and had been crushed with typical Roman brutality. Saying, 'Yes, pay the tax,' would be to say 'I'm not serious about God's kingdom.' But to incite people not to pay would at once incur trouble.¹⁶

Jesus gets his interlocutors to produce a coin, tacitly admitting that they kept the hated coinage, with its blasphemous inscription and its (to a Jew) illegal image, a portrait of Caesar himself. Whose is it? he asks. Caesar's, they answer. Well then, says Jesus, *you'd better pay back Caesar in his own coin* – and pay God back in *his* own coin!

The closest echoes to this double command are found in 1 Maccabees 2.68. Mattathias is telling his sons, especially Judas, to get ready for revolution. 'Pay back to the Gentiles what is due to them,' he says, 'and keep the law's commands'. Paying back the Gentiles was not meant to refer to money. I am sure that some of Jesus' hearers would have picked up that revolutionary hint. Because he was standing there looking at a coin, his surface meaning was, of course, that the tax had to be paid; but underneath was the strong hint that Caesar's regime was a blasphemous nonsense and that one day God would overthrow it.

The setting and the saying show decisively, against what is so frequently asserted by both Right and Left within the Enlightenment tradition, that Jesus did not mean it as indicating a separation between the spheres of Caesar and God, with each taking responsibility for a distinct

¹³On these Jewish movements, see *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), Part III.

¹⁴On Jesus and the Kingdom, see *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) and *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000).

¹⁵On the passage, see *Jesus and the Victory of God* 502-7.

¹⁶Indeed, Luke (23.2) indicates that this charge was levelled at Jesus before Pilate.

part of the world. Even at the surface level, the saying must have meant that God claimed the whole of life, including questions about taxes. Of course, Jesus acknowledges, you may have to pay taxes to the pagans, just as Jews in exile had to pray to God for the welfare of Babylon; but that doesn't mean that God is only concerned with a different, 'spiritual' world. God is present in the ambiguity, summoning people to an allegiance which transcended but certainly included the position they found themselves in vis-a-vis the occupying power.

Jesus' death can itself be seen as Jesus' own offering, simultaneously, of what was due to Caesar (crucifixion was what Caesar did to rebel kings) and what was due to God. Mark at least may have that in mind; certainly the primary meaning of his crucifixion narrative is what we would call 'political', though it is also theological and personal as well. Once again, the Enlightenment categories are simply unable to cope with the meanings the writers intend us to discover in their narratives, let alone the meanings which the central character, it seems, intended his followers to discern in his death. The death of Jesus brings to a head the ambiguous character of the Israelite monarchy from Saul and David right on through history. Calvary and Easter become the focal points of the apocalyptic and wisdom traditions, and hence of second-Temple Judaism's political theology: God's new world is born, claiming the kingdoms of the world as its own, because their central and most powerful weapon, death itself, has now been broken.¹⁷

Most of the fixed points in our knowledge of the early Christians are stories of persecution and martyrdom, as God's gospel and Caesar's gospel came into conflict.¹⁸ Think of the aged Polycarp, on trial for his life. The Roman governor applies two tests: first, you must blaspheme or curse Jesus Christ; second, you must swear 'by the Genius of the Emperor'. No loyal Christian could do either. Polycarp's answer is a specific rebuttal: 'I've served him for eighty-six years, and he's never done me any wrong; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' Caesar claimed to be King and Saviour; Polycarp is giving Jesus titles claimed by Caesar. But then, against our expectations, Polycarp proposes to explain to the governor what Christianity actually is. He respects his office, since 'we have been taught to render honour to the rulers and authorities who are appointed by God.' Even when Polycarp is on trial for his life, he is content to say, like Jesus before Pilate in John 19.11, that God has appointed the pagan governor who is about to pass sentence. This is puzzling to us, but it would have made sense to the authors of Daniel, Wisdom, Mark, or John.¹⁹

Or, for that matter, to Paul or Peter. Polycarp's double point (Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord, King and Saviour, but God has also appointed people, however unfit, as authorities in the world) is echoed in the epistles. 1 Peter 2.9 declares that Christians form a royal priesthood. Well, then, we conclude, they owe no loyalty to any other royalty or priesthood. On the contrary, says Peter (2.13–17): you must respect the rulers; fear God, honour the Emperor. So, we conclude, he's saying that earthly rulers are always right. Not so; the next paragraph (2.18–25) discusses what to do, not when justice is done, but when injustice is done, resulting in suffering. Most of the letter is about suffering and possible martyrdom. Daniel would have understood, though the ambiguity would confuse the superficial and over-bright lights of Enlightenment political analysis.

¹⁷On the political significance of the defeat of death see chs. 12 and 19 of my *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003).

¹⁸For details, see *The New Testament and the People of God* ch. 11.

¹⁹Polycarp adds, interestingly, the phrase 'as long as it isn't to our harm': we render honour, as long as that honour is not damaging to us. Where this modification to Romans 13 came from, and what precisely is meant by it, are matters of debate.

The centre of early Christian reflection remains Paul. It is often supposed that Paul's only political comment is Romans 13.1–7, where he states that God has ordained 'the powers that be'; but this just shows how far our traditions have taken us away from reality. There is no space to explore this in detail, but in almost every letter Paul demonstrates that Jesus is Lord, and that Caesar isn't; that the 'gospel' of Jesus upstages the 'gospel' of Caesar; that the true salvation is achieved through Jesus, not Caesar; that the world needs God's justice, not Roman justice; and, with great irony, that the cross, a hated symbol of Roman rule, had been transformed into the life-giving symbol of God's self-giving love. Paul's central arguments constitute a massive outflanking movement against the imperial rhetoric of his day (emperor-worship was the fastest-growing religion of the time).²⁰

So why did Paul write Romans 13?²¹ Because of the whole tradition of Jewish monotheism and political thought to which he was heir. God does not want anarchy. Nor, of course, do we. It's fine to point out the wickedness of earthly rulers, but when someone steals my car I want justice. It's all very well to say that people in power are self-seeking, but if nobody is in power the bullies and the burglars have it all their own way, and the weak and helpless suffer most. God doesn't want that. God has therefore instituted rulers and authorities (even at the obvious risk that most of them don't acknowledge him and only have a shaky idea of what justice actually is), in order to bring to his world such order as is possible until the day when the rule of Jesus himself is complete on earth as in heaven. This is the Christian version of the political viewpoint we find in Daniel, Wisdom and other Jewish texts. Romans 13 is not, then, a *carte blanche* for rulers to do what they like. Paul is not setting rulers on a high pedestal, above criticism. Instead, he is reminding them that they have been instituted by God and remain responsible to him for the authority they bear.

The final book of the New Testament, of course, has its own point of view. Just as Ephesians 6 indicates that there is still a battle to be fought against the wicked powers, so Revelation 13 paints an apocalyptic picture of an empire that has gone so bad that the only word to be spoken is one of judgment. God will judge blasphemous wickedness, especially when it uses violence against the helpless. That is part of the means by which the kingdom of this world is becoming the kingdom of our lord and his Messiah. But nothing in the Jewish tradition within which the book must be interpreted indicates that this indicates a blanket condemnation of all rulers and authorities, or a refusal to give them the honour of being God's agents, however misguided and dangerous on occasion they may be. Rather, what the early Christians offer is inaugurated eschatology: like the Israelites under their monarchy, chafing at its imperfections and looking for the fulfilment still to come, the followers of Jesus are to live under the rulers of the world, believing them to be appointed by God but not believing that that makes them perfect or that they do not need to be held accountable. On the contrary. Because they are God's servants they may well need to be reminded of their duty, however dangerous and uncomfortable a task that may be. The stories of Paul in Acts suggest that he sometimes did just that.²²

²⁰See esp. my 'Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans,' in *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically*, ed. C. Bartholemew (Carlisle: Paternoster), 173–193. This is a lightly revised version of my 'A Fresh Perspective on Paul?', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 83, no. 1, 21–39. See too N. T. Wright, 'Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire', in *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, 160–83. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000.

²¹On this, see esp. my *Romans* (New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X, 393–770), 715–23.

²²e.g. Acts 16.35–39; 23.3–5.

There is no space here to speak of the time between the suffering church in the third century and the church of Enlightenment modernism. One of the major achievements of Enlightenment rhetoric was to pour scorn on this long period, from the settlement of Constantine right through to the eighteenth century, as a hopeless compromise, maybe even ‘the fall of the church’. The very word ‘Christendom’ has become a sneer. But, though there is a vital point to be made about the dangers of assuming too ready an identification between the cause of the gospel and the cause of any particular country, nation or state (a danger which the Enlightenment has not helped us to avoid), this criticism is trivial and superficial, and fails to take into account the long, complex and by no means compromised tradition of serious Christian political thought throughout the millennium and a half from 300 AD to 1800 AD.²³ It is false to suggest that from Constantine onwards the church was muzzled, forced to do what its political masters told it. Of course that happened sometimes – just as it does today, even in countries where, as in the United States, non-establishment is much vaunted. There were also many times when the church was able to confront and challenge the state and crown directly. Establishment and martyrdom are closer than we might suppose. Think of Becket. But for our present purposes we skip over all this and more, and arrive at our present British institution of monarchy and its supposedly Christian meaning. How can the biblical theology of rulers and authorities be reinterpreted appropriately in this setting?

3. The Angled Mirror

The New Testament offers a theology of rulers and authorities as appointed by God. This places a huge weight of responsibility on the authorities which many modern democratic rulers cheerfully ignore. What is striking about the British monarchy, and some others that still remain, is that they openly acknowledge and indeed celebrate this responsibility.²⁴

Earthly rule is a kind of sacrament. Dangerous to say; more dangerous to ignore. Sacraments can be abused and turned into sympathetic magic, an attempt to tap into God’s power and life without paying the price of obedient loyalty. That is what protestants and rationalists have always objected to. But abuse does not destroy the proper use. Proper sacraments – action, drama, symbol and ritual on the one hand, words and prayers which tell God’s story and invoke his presence and power on the other – are neither magical nor empty. Monarchy, like all sacraments, needs to be held within a strong theology of the ascended Jesus, Lord and King of the whole world, the one who has all authority.

All human power-systems are subject to Christian critique. All power can become idolatrous. Every knee shall bow at Jesus’ name, and we must never tire of saying so. But there is another side to the story. Today’s cheap-and-chattering republicanism owes nothing to the Christian critique of human power, and everything to the sneer of the cynic, noting the price of everything but ignoring its value. Monarchy at its best is a symbolic reminder that the power-games of this world do not stand alone, but in a curious and many-sided relation to a transfiguring love and power which exists in a different dimension. In a constitution like that of Great Britain, monarchy is meant to be an angled mirror in which we see round the dark corner to that other

²³See particularly Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

²⁴In what follows I am indebted (not without some disagreements) to Ian Bradley’s striking new book, *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002).

dimension of reality, and realise the provisionality of all earthly power. Woe betide a monarchy that merely mirrors a society back to itself, or that becomes an idol instead of a mirror. The monarchy we have had for the last fifty years, however, has done its best to avoid those dangers, and to reflect and embody the self-giving love which calls mere power to account. Let us not be naive. But let us be appropriately cynical about cynicism itself.

What about the constitutional questions we face today? We are in danger of doing to our national institutions what developers in the 1960s did with our ancient buildings. They tore down wonderful structures that had survived centuries of fire, flood and bombs, and they put up concrete and glass monstrosities, reflecting the soulless secularism that created them. We now have agencies to stop that kind of thing; but our human institutions have no protection against the same unwelcome attention. Of course traditions and institutions must develop. But to tear them down because 'we live in the modern world' or because they are deemed inappropriate 'in this day and age' is to capitulate to an outworn ideology. There is nothing inevitable about a 'progress' towards flat secularist republics. Do we really want a French-style, or American-style, Presidency? Why do so many of our friends and neighbours envy us?

A Swiss doctor once said, 'British doctors don't know what tonsils are for, so they take them out; I don't know what tonsils are for, so I leave them in.' I think we *do* know, or are perhaps starting to rediscover, what monarchy is for. Monarchy is a reminder that the justice and mercy which rulers must practice are not their possession, but come from elsewhere; they are part of the God-given created order. Nations and states that have shed symbols which speak of responsibility to God have often become totalitarian. Of course, republics too can have such symbols. The United States maintains several, despite its official separation of church and state.

I am not suggesting that the present form of the British monarchy is necessarily ideal for the next century and beyond. That is an open question. But it is hard to deny, on Christian premises, that it is vital for the health of a nation and society to have such symbols, and the accompanying rituals with, yes, all their sacramental overtones. Since we have such a symbol, let us not be so foolish as to throw it away, especially when we have nothing else in mind to replace it. Before you cut down an oak tree without knowing what to plant in its place, ask yourself what you are about to lose, and whether you could ever get it back. Before you throw away real royalty, and turn our living heritage into a theme park of themselves, ask yourself if you would choose the obvious alternatives. Grey politicians standing for one last election; glitzy media stars improvising their own soap operas – neither can compete with what we already have. The stability and morale of Britain and many parts of the world (we should not underestimate the importance of the Commonwealth, or the extent to which it is held together by personal allegiance to the Crown) may be at stake.

What then about the interlinking of church, state and crown? The word 'establishment', granted, is a millstone round our necks. It has heavy and negative overtones. But the reality is very different. Away from the sneering world of the journalists, out in the country where it counts, the Church of England is still looked to by all kinds of people, from Lords Lieutenant to town councillors to groups of gypsies, not only to preach the gospel and minister the sacraments, but to be an honest broker, to hold the ring, to provide stability, focus and hope. Some sneer at 'implicit religion' and the inarticulate faith which (for instance) turns up at an Advent Carol Service but can't say why. I don't sneer at it; I want to work with it and nurture it, to take every spark of faith and help it, in its own time, to become a flame. Establishment means, among other things, that the church is there for everybody. Of course that sometimes means that nobody bothers, it also means that much of the society regards the church as its own. To cut the link, to insist that the church is only there for the fully paid up members, would be to send a signal to the rest of our world that we were pulling up the drawbridge, that we were no longer there for them.

Arguments for disestablishment regularly make points which cancel one another out. Establishment, say some, means a powerful church; the gospel is about weakness, not power; therefore Establishment must go. Establishment, say others, means the church is ruled by the state; the gospel is about the powerful rule of Jesus Christ; therefore we should abandon Establishment. You can't have it both ways. Either we're dangerously powerful or we're dangerously weak. The truth, as usual, is more complex.

The main motive for disestablishment, in the press and elsewhere, is the old secularist agenda. Many are offended that the Enlightenment hasn't had its way with every area of society. When people argue that we live in a religiously plural society, they usually don't want to take those religions seriously; they are just repeating another bit of Enlightenment rhetoric, that there are so many religions that they are all equally irrelevant. In fact, though of course non-Christian faiths must be taken seriously, they still only represent a tiny minority of people in this country.²⁵ The evidence suggests that many Jewish and Muslim leaders communities are happier to have Christianity as the established religion than to live in a secularized state. The Jews in particular know what that might mean.²⁶

There are, of course, different models of Establishment. The Scottish one is not the same as the English; we might profitably explore the differences.²⁷ I assume, as well, that Establishment ought to find ways of including, at whatever level, the other Christian churches – though I regard as disingenuous the anti-Establishment polemic from some Roman Catholic journalists, who conveniently forget the 'concordat' arrangements that still obtain, officially or unofficially, in many Roman Catholic countries.²⁸ As we move towards increased mutual understanding, co-operation and sharing of a common life, I would hope that more flexibility might emerge on the axis between ecumenism and Establishment.

The Establishment may well develop, then, but I see no reason to dismantle it. The negative signals sent by disestablishment would be profound, and unhelpful to both church and world. Do we really want the major turning-points in our national life to be conducted without prayer, and solemn seeking of God's blessing? Do we want leaders and rulers who will pledge themselves, not to ideals of justice and mercy which come ultimately from God, but simply to whatever the people may want? It is obviously not of the essence of the church that it should be established. The early church wasn't, and most churches are not today. But I believe it is of the *bene esse* of the church in England that it should continue to be established, while allowing for flexibility and development. Let us not capitulate to the tired, flatland world of secularism and modernism. Let

²⁵Since I wrote the first draft of this piece, the census figures for 2001 were published, showing that a remarkable 71.7% of the UK consider themselves in some sense Christian. The next figure down is 2.7% (Muslims).

²⁶It is often said that a future coronation might be a 'multi-faith' event. But it is by no means clear whether what the Christian church has understood to be the meaning of coronation (including e.g. anointing) over the last thousand and more years would be something that any of the 'other faiths' would want to endorse. If it means that the religious and spiritual significance of the coronation would be reduced to having various religious bodies all saying prayers in their own way and to their own deities, this would be simply a late victory for the Enlightenment's downgrading of all religions to 'what people do with their solitude', and would not honour either the other religions themselves or Christianity. On the spiritual significance of coronation see Bradley, *God Save the Queen*, ch. 4.

²⁷In Scotland, the monarch is not 'supreme head of the church'.

²⁸The classic ones being in France under Napoleon (1801) and in Italy (the 'Lateran Treaty') of 1929. Both were of course subsequently modified, but *de facto* arrangements still obtain. The question of the Act of Succession, which is endlessly raised at this point in the discussion, is more complex than it seems. Would the Roman Catholic church be prepared to give up its insistence that children of mixed marriages be brought up as Roman Catholics?

us go on, learning from past mistakes but also building on existing strengths, confident that our God has not led us up a blind alley these last thousand and more years, but that the gospel of his kingdom can and will guide and transform our national life as well as our personal lives for generations to come.