
Public legitimacy of the Church of England: Transcendence¹

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to take part in this fascinating and important day and discussion. I will speak from the perspective of Parliament and also from the perspective of my own orthodox Jewish faith: but in no sense do I purport to be a spokesperson for either.

The establishment of the Church of England appears to be much more controversial among the ranks of its own leaders than in most other forums. As a casual observer, opposition to religion as a force in politics and society is increasingly focused on the dangers inherent in institutionalised religion, and little concerned about the privileges or status associated with the Church of England as an established church.

And one can readily see why that might be so. If I ask myself what proportion of the world's problems today are directly or indirectly attributable to organised religion, a reasonable estimate, erring on the side of caution, would be 99.9%. If I ask myself what proportion appear to be directly or indirectly attributable to the established status of the Church of England (as distinct from any practical failings), the answer is probably the other 0.1% at most. Nor is this coincidence: one of the very reasons why establishment is a matter of concern for the Church of England more than for anyone else, is the fact that with establishment comes a responsibility to represent transcendence in a way that is restrained, responsible and balanced, and that necessarily contributes more to cohesion than to division.

¹ Daniel Greenberg CB; Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards; an address given at the Annual McDonald Centre Conference, 10 June 2024, on *The Public Legitimacy of the Church of England*, at Pusey House, Oxford.

The fact that this may be a positive or negative force for the development of the Church as a faith explains in part why establishment is continually controversial within the Church; but it also explains why it is relatively uncontroversial outside. So that for most people compiling a list of urgent societal problems relevant to religion in the United Kingdom today, establishment of the Church would come low on the list if it featured at all.

In Parliament, most things are capable of being treated as a source of constructive tension at best or corrosive resentment at worst: the balance of power between Lords and Commons; the balance of power between government, opposition and minority parties; gender, ethnicity and other diversities; and so on. But the fundamental role of the established Church in Parliament is an issue in relation to which I encounter resentment rarely. That might be natural if the privileges of establishment were limited to providing two minutes of prayers in each Chamber, but of course they actually extend to the occupation of a significant proportion of seats in the Upper House as well as to allocation of a significant proportion of time to matters relating to the Church. And yet the debate about establishment is more tepid in Parliament than within the Church itself.

The fact that, as a proportion, fewer citizens of the United Kingdom attend the Church of England than ever before, and that it is now in some senses at least a minority religion, is sometimes advanced as a threat to the right of establishment. This seems to me to miss the point of the significance of transcendence in the nature of establishment. When, say, 60% of people in the United Kingdom identified with the Church of England, 20% identified with another religion, and 20% with none, there was perhaps a compelling argument for giving 40% of the time and seats in Parliament allocated to religion to the other religions and to committed atheists or humanists.

But establishment was never really about the right to Parliamentary representation for the majority of worshippers or believers: the Bishops' Bench is not a kind of religious Treasury Bench, representing the majority religious party. Indeed, the less the Church of England also happens to represent the daily religious affiliations of a majority within the country, the more its residual role as the transcendent established Church is thrown into sharp relief, and the clearer it is what it provides to Parliament beyond some kind of spiritual representation of the umquhile majority practising faith in the country.

So, in that case, what exactly is it transcending? And the answer is, it provides a religious transcension of the biggest religious problem: division. In a world increasingly fragmented by destructive division of so many different kinds, an institution that represents the societal force of religion in a way which is deliberately and necessarily transcendent of those divisions, provides a unique and invaluable resource for every single resident of the country.

If I may say so, the bishops who serve on the Bishops' Benches appear to have intuitively understood what this aspect of transcendent establishment requires of them. They do not as a rule seek to inject into a debate the demands or even advice of Christian practice; nor do they, generally, purport to moralise or preach from a Christian perspective. It seems to me, that they strive to represent the values of the notion of religion as a fundament of the constitution, by appealing to fundamental concepts such as charity, mercy and forgiveness that may have a particular foundation and resonance within the Church, but have an indisputable moral claim at a level of simple humanity; and by doing so they cement the claims of those religious values in the heart of Parliament and the constitution. They represent, and in a more fundamental sense the wider nature of the Church's establishment in Parliament and the constitution represents, the durability and permanence of religion as an element in human society, which by transcending divisions of all kinds offers an enduring wisdom

and a perspective that is of equal value to every person whether they participate in the rituals of that Church or none.

And this brings me naturally to what is for me, and I repeat that I speak for myself only, the Jewish faith perspective on establishment. For me, debates about whether the new King should affirm to the defence of “the faith” or faith in general, and whether roles should be found for non-Anglican clerics in the Coronation, completely missed the point of the nature of establishment as a transcendent force. The idea that there should be some kind of proportional representation in religious involvement in the Coronation is itself not a unifying concept, but an approach that reinforces sectarian division and defies the depth of ecumenicalism which is capable of being at the heart of establishment.

When I see a bishop officiating at the Coronation or at any other state occasion, I do not see a representative of the 49% of the population, or whatever proportion it is from time to time, that identify with Anglicanism. I see a neutral representation of a church that accepts the continuing burden of establishment, acknowledges a responsibility to humanity as a whole, whose participation is a message that the fundamentals of religion in an inclusive and non-sectarian way are core values and components of the British Constitution, that transcends the buildings, clerics and rituals of the Church of England.

As someone who adheres to a particular religious faith, it is more valuable for me to know that I live in a country that respects and protects the concept of religion as a constitutional principle, then it would be to have a token rabbi in the House of Lords.

I can understand the urgency of the voices within the Church of England who find this kind of responsibility for transcendence obstructive to their own spiritual aspirations. But I also believe that it is important for me to come to this conference today, speaking from two entirely external perspectives, to

encourage the leaders of the established Church to cherish the value that they provide to society as a whole by virtue of the transcendence that is at the heart of the notion of establishment.

Sounding the voice of religion without being partisan in a sectarian or denominational sense is a thin and wobbly line to tread: but I see the Church treading it for the most part successfully in an apparently intuitive and subliminal way. It is to that aspect of your success that I draw attention in my remarks today; and it is that aspect of your importance that I encourage you to embrace and perpetuate.

Thank you very much for listening.
