

# A Church *for* the Nation

## Beyond Establishment

Resetting Church-State Relations in England

By Jonathan Chaplin

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Review by Andrew Goddard

The coronation of King Charles by the Archbishop of Canterbury has shown the peculiar relationship of the Church of England to the crown. This has for a long time been sidelined by both church and state. For many Anglicans, the coronation, like Queen Elizabeth II's funeral, has demonstrated that through being the established church, the Church of England can better serve the nation and communicate central Christian truths to millions of people. It is argued that both services offered a coherent, attractive, often countercultural witness, whether in calling those with political authority toward service or in the comforting good news of resurrection hope in the face of

the death of a much-loved, faithful servant of Christ.

It is, however, impossible to deny that what we have inherited represents an increasingly bizarre set of institutional arrangements in the contemporary United Kingdom, and when set alongside the rest of the Anglican Communion, especially where there is a longstanding principle separating church and state. Pragmatic appeals to supposed benefits, therefore, should not be used to once again ignore or dismiss a host of important theological, ecclesiological, political, and missiological questions about the established nature of the Church of England.

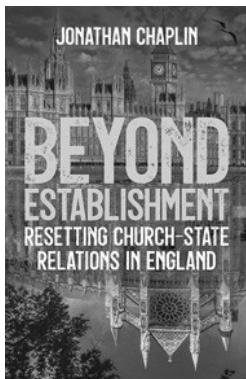
Jonathan Chaplin's *Beyond Establishment: Resetting Church-State Relations in England* opens these questions in an accessible and wide-ranging manner. Drawing on his expertise as a political philosopher who is also a lifelong Anglican, he answers them by arguing for "a theologically principled reconsideration of the proper jurisdictional spheres of Church and state." He wants the church to initiate this development on its own terms, not to wait and then either resist or succumb to pressure from the government and wider society. His book represents the strongest case available for "disestablishment," although the complexities of such language are clear. Chaplin's alternative draws heavily on the different model of church-state relations found north of the border in the Church of Scotland, which is Presbyterian and described as "established."

Although Chaplin argues that there are unwarranted (though now minor) privileges and burdens placed on the church by the current arrangements, his case is fundamentally principled. His alternative will nevertheless clearly reconfigure various practical arrangements in ways he explores in some detail. He deconstructs aspects of establishment, such as crown appointment of bishops, bishops sitting in the House of Lords, and parliamentary approval of church legislation. Here an even stronger case can perhaps be made about the harmful effect of these structures. Why should the ability to function in Parliament's upper chamber be seen as so important when the church selects diocesan bishops? Why are there complaints that

some bishops are not as focused as they should be on the diocese because they are so often in Westminster? Why was the possibility of parliamentary intervention apparently a factor in the bishops' decision-making on their proposals for same-sex marriage? Ultimately, though, Chaplin's case does not depend on convincing people that our system "doesn't work" in these areas or that he has something that will in some sense "work better."

Chaplin's emphasis is on being guided by an account of the distinctive place and calling of the church and of political authority within a social and political vision. This is his major contribution. He critiques arguments claiming there can be a Christian nation, whose political authorities might rightly be religiously affiliated, and argues instead for state "impartiality" (preferred over "neutrality"). Political authority is unable to determine religious truth, and exceeds its divine calling when it seeks to do so (as in the oath sworn by King Charles to "maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed religion established by law").

He also stresses that the church as a "voluntary, transnational, and non-territorial fellowship" should neither claim privileges over other religious groups nor give the state authority over how it orders its life and mission (as in King Charles being supreme governor). He argues for this biblically and theologically, but he is also clearly shaped by the neo-Calvinist, Dutch Reformed tradition of sphere sovereignty; his major academic work is on Herman Dooyeweerd as a Christian philosopher of state and civil society. This differs significantly from the political thought of the English and magisterial



Reformers, which is much more open to a theology of establishment and merits greater consideration than offered here.

Such a rigorously theological focus is almost totally lacking in discussions about establishment. This is in part because it stands in sharp contrast to a dominant English Anglican ethos that approaches these questions more through respecting historical development and tradition (an area given relatively little attention in the book). This ethos is only open to church-state relationships evolving gradually when required to address new pragmatic challenges arising in new contexts. It would be tragic if this ethos led to the book's argument going unanswered, but this is quite likely to happen, not least because any response that seeks to offer a *principled* defense of the *status quo* is likely to be much less convincing,

both theologically and as political philosophy amid the reality of British culture and politics.

Chaplin strongly rebuts commonplace arguments in defense of establishment. These would reject his proposals, again primarily on consequentialist grounds, by claiming they amount to conceding to secularism, would inevitably lead to some non-Christian worldview becoming "established," and effectively undermine the church's pastoral and political engagement with society.

If Chaplin's vision of what he calls "equitable public pluralism" were accepted, the changes made to the coronation would have extended well beyond leaders of other faiths being invited to greet the king as he left the abbey or the archbishop prefacing the oaths by noting the church "will seek to foster an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely"

State impartiality, which he sees as a theological demand, would require a civil ceremony, and whether any faith may then welcome the monarch in a public service would be unofficial. The Church of England would, he argues, "remain a church for the nation" but — for both its own good and that of the nation — it would be "no longer officially acknowledged by the state as the church of the nation."

There is limited appetite to even open this debate within the Church of England. This book should whet people's appetites. It provides an indispensable guide to the issues, and a theologically rich but also practical vision of where we may be headed by the time of the next coronation, that must not be ignored.

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