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No king but Caesar? The Headship of the Church in Anglican Theology

John Richardson

The Myth of the Monarchy

One of the most comprehensively misunderstood concepts in Anglican theology is surely that of the monarch as the ‘Supreme Governor of the Church of England’. This is no small matter of detail. As we hear frequently in the media, it affects discussions on the constitution of the country, the future of the monarchy and, of course, the future of the Anglican church.

In the minds of those who think about it at all, the Queen is ‘the Head of the Church of England’ in a real, if rather vague, sense. True, she is properly speaking its ‘Supreme Governor’, but nevertheless people think they know what they mean. Their understanding is that the Queen stands in a special relationship with the Anglican church because it is the ‘Established’, and therefore privileged, church. This relationship is expressed in one direction by the Church including many formal prayers for the monarchy in its liturgies and having bishops in the House of Lords, and in the other direction by the Queen opening the sessions of General Synod and, at least formally, appointing the English bishops. Sometimes this special relationship is perceived as a problem for the Church of England—questions are, for example, being asked about the appointments process and indeed the whole concept of Establishment. But generally it is seen as a relationship enjoyed by no other body in this country.

That is the myth, and like all good myths it contains just a dash of the truth. It is also a good myth in that it is immensely powerful. But like every myth it happens not to be quite true in fact.

Henry VIII

To understand the notion of the monarch as Supreme Governor properly, we have to go back to the time of Henry VIII. Even here we find a myth waiting to trip us up, for in the popular mind Henry was the king who ‘made himself’ head of the Church of England. (Even the captions in the National Portrait Gallery describe Henry in just these terms.) However, although it is true that

Henry indeed used the term ‘Head’ (modified in the days of Elizabeth I to ‘Supreme Governor’), it is of course entirely false, both constitutionally and theologically, to say that Henry made himself head of the church.

It is well known that in the early part of his reign Henry VIII was embroiled in a conflict with the Pope arising from his desire to have his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled. Moreover, Henry was persuaded (or at least had persuaded himself) that his marriage to Catherine was morally wrong—a conviction not without foundation, for Henry had had to obtain special dispensation from an earlier Pope to be able to marry the widow of his own deceased brother. And in addition to this moral anxiety, Henry was under the pressure of time in needing to produce an heir.¹

Henry therefore launched a two-pronged plan to obtain the desired annulment. The first, and more moderate prong, was to canvas theological and legal opinion in his favour from the universities of Europe. This approach was suggested by, and therefore the task was delegated to, one Thomas Cranmer, then Archdeacon of Taunton.

The second, and rather more inventive, prong was to wrest control of the English church from the Pope so that decisions made by that church would henceforth be binding, without the possibility of papal veto. However, even Henry could not simply pass a law saying ‘The English church is no longer answerable to the Pope’. If Henry was to achieve his goal at home, he had to make a legal and theological case for it.

Praemunire

Fortunately for him, Henry was able to find the basis for just such a case in two strands of earlier English history. The first was the precedent set by earlier kings in their dealings with the church in general and the Pope in particular. There existed in English law ‘Statutes of *Praemunire*’, dating back to the reigns of Edward III in 1351 and Richard II in 1390. ‘Statutes of Provisors’ had originally been enacted by Parliament in those years to prevent the appointment by the Pope of non-resident foreigners to lucrative posts in the English church. The first and second Statutes of *Praemunire* supported these statutes by making it an act of treason to appeal to the Pope against the decisions of the king of England or his courts. Henry was thus

able to invoke the principle of *praemunire* to make appeals to the Pope or foreign courts similarly treasonous in his own day.

Empire

The second historical precedent which served his purpose was the political status of England itself. Henry was able to argue that England was and always had been not merely a kingdom but an Empire. And thus, as an Emperor, Henry had as much right as (say) Constantine to direct the workings of the church. With the help of theologians such as Cranmer, Henry was now able to argue that the church was ultimately under his authority, not only legally or by *force majeure*, but on the basis of theological principle. This understanding became the foundation of one of the earliest pieces of legislation which Henry used to prise control of the English church from the hands of the Pope. Hence the opening line of the 1533 'Act in Restraint of Appeals' declared that

...by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and so hath been accepted in the world, governed by one supreme head and king ...unto whom a body politic, compact of all sorts and degrees of people divided in terms and by names of spirituality and temporality, be bounden and ought to bear, next to God, a natural and humble obedience; [...].²

Already we can see the outline of Henry's full-blown position. Henry was 'supreme head' of England, and although the English 'empire' might be divided into distinct realms of 'spirituality and temporality', both owed equal obedience to the king who, under God, had

..plenary, whole and entire power, pre-eminence, authority, prerogative and jurisdiction, to render and yield justice, and final determination...in all causes, matters, debates and contentions...without restraint or provocation to any foreign princes, or potentates of the world...³

Again, we should note the phrase 'all causes'. The king was now (or rather, was once again) to be recognized as the final authority within England, thus simultaneously depriving the Church of Rome of its power and the Church of England of any head on earth but Henry. However, on the plus side for the Church of England, it also meant that the English church was—

...sufficient and meet of itself, without the inter-meddling of any exterior person or persons, to declare and determine all such doubts and to administer all such offices and duties as to their rooms spiritual doth appertain...⁴

It was the combination of the principles of *praemunire* and empire, and the Acts of Parliament which flowed from them, which paved the way for the 1534 'Act of Supremacy' and the formal break with Rome. Consisting of one short paragraph, this began with the declaration—

Albeit the King's Majesty justly and rightfully is and oweth to be the Supreme Head of the Church of England...yet nevertheless for corroboration and confirmation thereof...be it enacted by authority of this present Parliament, that the King our Sovereign Lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only Supreme Head on earth of the Church of England, called *Anglicana Ecclesia* [...].⁵

Once again, however, we should be careful to note that the Act of Supremacy does not *make* Henry the head of the Church of England. It simply corroborates and confirms his status. Only God can make someone head of his church, but this is precisely what God had done in the case of the English monarch. All the more reason, then, that the monarch's authority should be recognized and obeyed!

By Royal Appointment

Cranmer was not the first to suggest that the king might have this authority, but he certainly gave it definition, not only in Henry's mind and plans but in his own writings. The full extent of Cranmer's theology can be seen in answers he gave to certain questions which arose late in 1540. After eight questions concerning the sacraments, the ninth turns to the appointment of church ministers;

Whether the apostles lacking a higher power, as in not having a christian king among them, made bishops by that necessity, or by authority given them by God?⁶

Cranmer answers,

All Christian princes have committed unto them immediately of God the whole cure of all their subjects, as well concerning the administration of God's word for the cure of souls, as concerning the ministration of things political and civil governance. And in both these ministrations they must have sundry ministers under them, to supply that which is appointed to their several offices.

The civil ministers under the king's majesty in this realm of England, be those whom it shall please his highness for the time to put in authority under him: as for example, the lord chancellor, lord treasurer, lord great master, lord privy seal, lord admiral, mayors, sheriffs, &c.

The ministers of God's word under his majesty be the bishops, parsons, vicars, and such other priests as be appointed by his highness to that ministration: as for example, the bishop of Canterbury, the bishop of Duresme, the bishop of Winchester, the parson of Winwick, &c. All the said officers and ministers, as well of the one sort as of the other, be appointed, assigned, and elected in every place, by the laws and orders of kings and princes.⁷

We should notice that Cranmer draws a direct parallel between ministers of the state and ministers of the church. *Both* are ministers of the Crown, and both are therefore rightly *appointees* of the Crown, because God has given Christian princes 'the *whole* cure' of their subjects, regarding the administration of God's word as well as civil matters. Cranmer's view of the relationship between church and monarch is perhaps not exactly 'Erastian'⁸. He does not see the state as having rights over the church, but there is simply no distinction between the ecclesiastical and civil realms under the king's authority. Therefore the king must of needs appoint ministers to both equally. The present practice of having the monarch, albeit through the Prime Minister, appointing the bishops of the Church of England is thus *not* an example of 'state interference in the workings of the church' but, according to Henrician theology, the expression of the authority of the king to appoint *all* his ministers.⁹

However, Cranmer has more to say on the subject, specifically concerning the effect of the rites of the church;

In the admission of many of these officers be divers comely ceremonies and solemnities used, which be not of necessity, but only for a good order and seemly fashion: for if such offices and ministrations were committed without such solemnity, they were nevertheless truly committed. And there is no more promise of God [in Scripture], that grace is given in the committing of the ecclesiastical office, than it is in the committing of the civil office.¹⁰

According to Cranmer, therefore, the ceremonial ordination and consecration of an ecclesiastical servant confers no more of divine grace than the ceremonies which might (or might not) accompany the appointment of a civil servant. The ceremonies are not necessary—they simply add beauty and dignity to the occasion. Cranmer makes this even more explicit in his answer to a later question—Whether in the new Testament be required any consecration of a bishop and priest, or only appointing to the office be sufficient? (Question 12)

In the new Testament, he that is appointed to be a bishop or a priest, needeth no consecration by the scripture; for election or appointing thereto is sufficient.¹¹

Ordination and consecration are not necessary ‘sacramental’ acts in Cranmer’s thinking for ‘appointing...is sufficient’. However, question nine specifically concerned the apostles: did they make bishops ‘by authority given them by God?’. Cranmer continues his answer thus;

In the apostles’ time, when there was [*sic*] no christian princes, by whose authority ministers of God’s word might be appointed, nor sins by the sword corrected, there was no remedy then for the correction of vice, or appointing of ministers, but only the consent of christian multitude [*sic*] among themselves, by an uniform consent to follow the advice and persuasion of such persons whom God had most endued with the spirit of counsel and wisdom. And at that time, forasmuch as the christian people had no sword nor governor amongst them, they were constrained of necessity to take such curates and priests as either they knew themselves to be meet thereunto, or else as were commended unto them by other that were so replete with the Spirit of God, with such knowledge in the profession of Christ, such wisdom, such conversation and counsel, that they ought even of very conscience to give credit unto

them, and to accept such as by them were presented: and so sometime the apostles, and other, unto whom God had given abundantly his Spirit, sent or appointed ministers of God's word; sometime the people did choose such as they thought meet thereunto; and when any were appointed or sent by the apostles or other, the people of their own voluntary will with thanks did accept them; not for the supremity, impery [*sic*], or dominion that the apostles had over them to command, as their princes or masters; but as good people, ready to obey the advice of good counsellors, and to accept any thing that was necessary for their edification and benefit.¹²

Cranmer's long answer to a short question is that the process of appointments within the early church was an interim solution, awaiting the advent of the 'christian prince' who would have divine authority to appoint ministers of the word *and* the power of the sword to govern the church. Prior to that, Cranmer envisages a doubtless idealized situation where appointments could be made by the apostles, by other wise and spiritual guides or by the people in the local church—each listening to and recognizing the other. Significantly (and understandably), however, Cranmer minimizes the *authority* of the apostles. The people accepted the appointments they made, not because the apostles (or, by implication, their successors!) had authority to command 'as...princes or masters' but out of a 'voluntary will' in recognition of the wisdom of people endowed with the Holy Spirit. The people did not *obey* the apostles in this regard, they simply *agreed* with them! Only with the advent of 'christian princes' would *obedience* become the appropriate response to the making of an ecclesiastical appointment.

Cranmer's Vision

Once we understand Cranmer's vision, however, we can feel its power even whilst not automatically agreeing with his interpretation of scripture, for it is very clear from Cranmer's writing here and elsewhere that he regarded Romans 13 not simply as advice to Christians living under secular authority but, in the fullness of time, as the blueprint for society. Both state *and* church would be ruled over by the godly prince, with the magistrate's sword available to punish wrongdoers equally in both. It is a far cry from the modern tendency, enshrined above all in the American Constitution, to assume that the state will *and should* always be in tension with, and therefore kept at a distance from, the workings of the church.

It is not necessary that we should agree with Cranmer. But it is vital that we should understand him, for it is *this* theology which undergirded the split with Rome and on which the relationship between church and state was constructed in the opening years of independent Anglicanism. The separation from Rome was justified not on the grounds that the Church of England was capable of governing itself, but that the King of England was divinely authorised to govern his church just as much as his state. The full expression of this understanding is given in the speech delivered by Cranmer at the coronation of Edward VI—

Your majesty is God's vice-gerent and Christ's vicar within your own dominions, and to see, with your predecessor Josiah, God truly worshipped, and idolatry destroyed, the tyranny of the bishops of Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed. These acts be signs of a second Josiah, who reformed the church of God in his days. You are to reward virtue, to revenge sin, to justify the innocent, to relieve the poor, to procure peace, to repress violence, and to execute justice throughout your realms.¹³

According to Cranmer, therefore, the *Anglican* model of kingship is the Old Testament model, with the king responsible for religious truth and reform. Let the others believe what they will—the English king is to the Church of England what the Pope is to the Church of Rome: 'Christ's vicar' on earth!

Cranmer did not, however, see the power of the king as being conferred by the church, whether through the coronation ceremony or in any other way. On the contrary, the king's authority derived directly from God. Cranmer continued,

...yet I openly declare before the living God...that I have no commission to denounce your majesty deprived, if your highness miss in part, or in whole, of these performances [...].¹⁴

On the contrary, as he said earlier in the same speech,

The solemn rites of coronation have their ends and utility, yet neither direct force or necessity. [...] For they [kings] be God's anointed, not in respect of the oil which the bishop useth, but in consideration of their

power which is ordained, of the sword which is authorised, of their persons which are elected by God [...].¹⁵

Thus, in Cranmer's view, the Crown stood above the church just as much as it did above the state in terms of its authority under God. The ministers of the church did not confer anything on the monarch at the coronation that was not already his by God's giving, nor could the church deprive the king of that authority which God had given him if it was misused.

We must realize also that the monarch was not understood to be head of 'the Church of England' in the sense of it being one denomination amongst many but in the original, *geographical*, sense. In fact, the church of which Henry was established as head by the Act of Supremacy was what we would properly call the Roman Catholic Church in England. And Henry was its head, not because the status of that church had been changed from 'Roman Catholic' to 'Church of England' (on the contrary, under Henry there were very few doctrinal moves away from Romanism and fewer still towards a distinctive Protestantism), but because he was the head of 'all sorts and degrees of people' committed to him by God, whether temporal or spiritual.

Thus, even allowing for the change of title, the Queen today is not 'Supreme Governor of the Church of England' in a special and exclusive sense, but Supreme Governor of everything inclusive of the Church of England. This is made clear by Article XXXVII;

The King's Majesty hath the chief power in this Realm of *England*, and other his Dominions, unto whom the chief Government of all Estates of this Realm, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Civil, in all causes doth appertain, and is not, nor ought to be, subject to any foreign Jurisdiction.

Where we attribute to the King's Majesty the chief government, by which Titles we understand the minds of some slanderous folks to be offended; we give not to our Princes the ministering either of God's Word, or of the Sacraments, the which thing the Injunctions also lately set forth by *Elizabeth* our Queen do most plainly testify; but that only prerogative, which we see to have been given always to all godly Princes in holy Scriptures by God himself; that is, that they should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be

Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evildoers.

The important point in this Article is often felt to be the ‘toning down’ of the monarch’s role in that the monarch lacks the *potestas ordinis*—the rightful function of actually preaching and ministering the sacraments. This is often seen as a vital distinction preserving the independence of the church, and no doubt it was intended that it should be understood as such. But in fact this is the one limitation on the otherwise absolute prerogative of the monarch, stated in this Article to have been given by God himself, to rule ‘*all estates and degrees...whether Ecclesiastical or Temporal*’. Insofar as Cranmer’s intention was that the monarch would appoint the church’s officers, determine its doctrine and authorize the liturgical context during which the word of God would be preached and through which the sacraments would be ministered, it was a very small limitation!

Moreover, the only sense in which the relationship between the Queen and the Church of England is in fact ‘special’ is that her rule over that body is expressed by certain legal instruments—the system we know as Establishment—in a way that does not apply to chapels, temples and mosques. Nevertheless, under the terms of this Article the present Queen is Supreme Governor of the Roman Catholic Church in England just as much as was Henry VIII. Indeed, she is also Supreme Governor of every Baptist chapel, every Hindu temple and every Muslim mosque, just as much as, and precisely for the same reason that, she is Supreme Governor of every local authority and parish council.¹⁶ Nor is this merely some quirk of Anglican theology, as is clear from the remaining fragments of the Elizabethan Act of Supremacy of 1559 still on the statute books;

...such jurisdiction, privileges, superiorities and pre-eminences, spiritual and ecclesiastical, as by any spiritual or ecclesiastical power or authority have heretofore been, or may be lawfully exercised or used...shall for ever, by authority of this present Parliament, be united and annexed to the imperial crown of this realm.¹⁷

The word ‘any’ with reference to spiritual and ecclesiastical powers was clearly intended to mean precisely that. According to Cranmer’s own understanding, the Anglican formularies and the existing statutes of Parliament, no power

(not even a spiritual power) exists above the Queen's authority in this realm of England!

Caesar

Of course, Cranmer's position on the monarchy is vulnerable to attack, as was made uncomfortably clear during his trial when he was questioned on it by the lawyer Dr Thomas Martin.

Martin: Now, sir...you denied that the pope's holiness was supreme head of the church of Christ.

Cranmer: I did so.

Martin: Who say you then is supreme head?

Cranmer: Nobody.

Martin: Ah! why told you not king Henry this, when you made him supreme head? and now nobody is. This is treason against his own person, as you then made him.

Cranmer: I mean not but every king in his own realm and dominion is supreme head, and so was he supreme head of the church of Christ in England.

Martin: Is this always true? and was it ever so in Christ's church?

Cranmer: It was so.

Martin: Then what say you by Nero? He was the mightiest prince of the earth, after Christ was ascended. Was he head of Christ's church?

Cranmer: Nero was Peter's head.

Martin: I ask, whether Nero was head of the church, or no? If he were not, it is false that you said before, that all princes be, and ever were, heads of the church within their realms.

Cranmer: Nay, it is true, for Nero was the head of the church, that is, in worldly respect of the temporal bodies of men, of whom the church consisteth; for so he beheaded Peter and the apostles. And the Turk too is head of the church of Turkey.

Martin: Then he that beheaded the heads of the church, and crucified the apostles, was head of Christ's church; and he that was never member of the church, is head of the church, by your new found understanding of God's word.¹⁸

The interrogation halts at this point, and one can almost hear Martin's triumphant cry of 'No more questions!' Yet although Cranmer is clearly

discomfitted, he maintains his position: the monarch—any monarch—is head of the church insofar as he is the monarch, even though his headship may only extend in a worldly manner to ‘the temporal bodies of men’. But as Cranmer had shown in his speech before Edward VI, the ideal was a godly head personally involved in the establishment and defence of spiritual truth.

Desuetude

It is here, however, that we encounter the problem of desuetude, for the principle is well established that a law which ceases to be observed ceases to be a law *de facto* even while it still remains on the statute books. A famous example is the requirement in English law for all men to practise archery, which was only finally repealed in 1960.¹⁹ The reality is that very few people were still practising archery in the interests of the defence of the realm in the late 1950s and probably no-one had been fined for this omission in some considerable time.

Similarly, in law the Queen is Supreme Governor of all spiritual bodies in this country. Regarding most of them, however, this principle has for most practical purposes fallen into desuetude. It is still the case that foreign ecclesiastical powers and spiritual authorities cannot summons or execute judgement on English citizens,²⁰ but it is only with regard to the Church of England that there are any legal instruments in place to give expression to the Queen’s authority.

One suspects that this situation originally arose with connivance of the Church of England itself. If other bodies and denominations were also established by law, they would perhaps have been able to claim the powers and privileges which for a long time Anglicans enjoyed in this country over against their fellow Roman Catholic and Non-conformist citizenry. Some may now feel a certain satisfaction insofar as the Church of England is now the only spiritual body controlled by Parliament, even though Parliament itself now consists largely of the spiritually unbelieving and the theologically uninformed. However, there is a greater, and unrecognized problem, in that the structures of Establishment were put in place on the basis of a set of theological assumptions which have themselves fallen into desuetude. Almost no-one today—certainly no-one in the upper reaches of either the Church of England or of Parliament—takes seriously (much less wishes to apply) Cranmer’s theology of the relationship between monarch and church. Yet it is the very cornerstone of independent Anglicanism. Our liturgical prayers for the Queen are not the doffing of the

ecclesiastical hat towards the temporal authority, but petitions for that person committed by God with the governing of our church, on whom its health and future depends.

Cranmer's theology was the basis for the break with Rome and for the structures which replaced the authority of Rome in the English church. In considering the nature and future of the Church of England, we cannot therefore (as we nevertheless currently seem to be doing) simply overlook that theology without committing an act of culpable blindness and ignorance.

Supreme Governor

At the very least, this means that we must stop talking about the status of the monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England as if it were something which can be changed either by an Act of Parliament or a Measure of Synod. The position of the monarch in relation to the Church of England is a *theological understanding*, not a legal status. The law expresses that understanding in a somewhat minimalist way, but it does not create it. Thus in the absence of an acknowledgement that the initial theological understanding was wrong, if the Queen ceased to be the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, she would by the same token cease to be Queen.

It is, of course, impossible that a legal apparatus could be put in place to extend the Queen's power into other spiritual bodies under her governance. However, rescinding the apparatus by which the Queen's authority is expressed in the Church of England would, in the present circumstances, create even more administrative and theological difficulties than we are now facing.

A Headless Church

The difficulty for the Church of England in changing the relationship between Crown and church, however, is that abolishing the legal instruments of Establishment would not, as most seem to imagine, thereby restore the Church of England to its original pristine condition, free of Erastianism. Legally, it would doubtless allow the Church of England to manage its affairs with the structures it currently has in place. Theologically, however, it would produce an ecclesiological anomaly—a headless church.

The Church of England initially justified its existence as a separate body—specifically as a church separate from Rome—on the grounds that it was

properly ruled over by the English monarch. It most certainly did not justify its independence on the grounds that the English church should properly govern itself. And least of all did it justify its independence on the understanding that, in the absence of the monarch, the church should be ruled by bishops exercising legally enforceable episcopal authority. We can see this if we return to the answers Cranmer gave to the questions put to him about the appointment and power of bishops and priests. Question 11 asked,

Whether a bishop hath authority to make a priest by the scripture, or no? and whether any other, but only a bishop, may make a priest?

Cranmer's answer is,

A bishop may make a priest by the scripture, and so may princes and governors also, and that by the authority of God committed to them, and the people also by their election: for as we read that bishops have done it, so christian emperors and princes usually have done it; and the people, before christian princes were, commonly did elect their bishops and priests.

Cranmer absolutely does not believe in the 'historical episcopal succession'. On the contrary, the king, or even the people themselves, may start a new line of ministry. Thus question 13 asks;

Whether (if it befotuned a prince christian-learned to conquer certain dominions of infidels, having none but temporal-learned men with him) it be defended by God's law, that he and they should preach and teach the word of God there, or no? and also make and constitute priests, or no?

And Cranmer answers,

It is not against God's law, but contrary, they ought indeed so to do; and there be histories that witnesseth, that some christian princes, and other laymen unconsecrate [*sic*], have done the same.

Unconsecrated layman, as well as Christian princes, may establish a ministry of preaching and teaching, and may indeed 'make and constitute priests'. But what about the sacramental ministry? Question 14 presses the point

further;

Whether it be forfended by God's law, that (if it so fortun'd that all the bishops and priests of a region were dead, and that the word of God should remain there unpreached, the sacrament of baptism and others unministered,) that the king of that region should make bishops and priests to supply the same, or no?

To which Cranmer answers succinctly, "It is not forbidden by God's law."

We may note that Cranmer does not quite say 'Yes!' (Perhaps he is suspicious of anything which might give an excuse for ecclesiastical anarchy.) Nevertheless, his answer is still *effectively* yes—kings, and even ordinary laymen, may start or restart the church by making their own bishops and priests who can preach the word of God and administer the sacraments. Indeed, not only does God's law not forbid this, but in certain circumstances they have a duty to undertake it. Moreover, it is helpful to remind ourselves of Cranmer's earlier point, that the ceremonies accompanying the appointment of bishops and priests add no more to their office than the ceremonies accompanying the appointment of a civil servant. *Social appointment* makes a bishop or priest, not ecclesiastical *consecration* for which there is no scriptural warrant.

Thus it is clear that, in Cranmer's understanding, should the church lose its head, it ought not thereby to devolve to a quasi-Romanism without the Pope, as seems to be the assumption behind almost all current Anglican thinking, since neither Pope nor bishop is any more to be obeyed *as if he were a prince or master* than were the apostles by the early church. From Cranmer's point of view, the disestablishment of the Church of England would have the theological effect of throwing it back into spiritual infancy—as if it were still awaiting the emergence of the godly prince and the proper application of Romans 13. We would once again have 'no king but Caesar'.

Error

This recognition, however, raises a further difficulty, and it is one with which, due to our ignoring of our theological history, the Church of England is currently faced, namely the lack of a proper basis for theological authority in the church. Once again, the problem is desuetude, for although the Church of England is still legally established in England (though probably not for much

longer) the monarch no longer rules the church doctrinally. And yet this was clearly Cranmer's intention, and the understanding of the monarchs from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I and beyond. Henry's Act of Supremacy declares that the monarch has full authority to reform the church's doctrine and practice:

...our said Sovereign Lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall have full power and authority from time to time to visit, repress, redress, reform, order, correct, restrain, and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offences, contempts, and enormities, whatsoever they be, which by any manner [*sic*] spiritual authority or jurisdiction ought or may lawfully be reformed, repressed, ordered, redressed, corrected, restrained, or amended, most to the pleasure of Almighty God [...].²¹

Similarly, Edward at his coronation was told that he had authority to see 'God truly worshipped, and idolatry destroyed'. Again, under the terms of her own Act of Supremacy (which are still in force), Elizabeth I was given authority—

...for reformation order and correction of the same [ecclesiastical state and persons], and of all manner of errors, heresies, schisms, abuses, offences, contempts and enormities [...].²²

Again, Article XXXVII declares that the monarch should not only rule the ecclesiastical estate but 'restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evildoers' contained therein!

The English church has no *magisterium* comparable to the Church of Rome because its independence was established on the basis that the *monarch* would protect it from error. The difficulty is obviously that the monarch no longer does this—indeed, has not done so for a very long time. Doubtless we may feel there are good reasons why this is so. But we cannot merely ignore the difficulty and assume that our present structures have adequately filled the gap. Indeed, there is every reason to argue that a Synod containing a large number of democratically elected, theologically untrained and pastorally untried laypeople of all sorts and conditions is the last body to be entrusted with any matters of theological significance—unless one believes (as some clearly do!) that the Holy Spirit works best where there is least human understanding of God's ways.²³

Theologically speaking, the Church of England here and abroad has been 'headless' for a long time. Until this is recognized, and until adequate and theologically coherent structures, based on a proper ecclesiology, are put in place, we will see more and more confusion and increasing diocesan anarchy as witnessed by the recent decisions in New Westminster, Canada.

Conclusions

It was not the intention to argue here either for or against Cranmer's theology regarding the monarch and the church. It does not matter in the first instance that Cranmer's theology is not that of Hooker, or the Caroline Divines, or the Lambeth Quadrilateral.²⁴ It does not even matter that many Anglicans today would find it bizarre or disagreeable. What matters is that it is the branch on which we sit, and what is important is that we should understand it properly so that the contemporary debate can be properly informed.

One of the disappointments of the Reformation is that the teachings of the great Reformers were quickly forgotten by their followers. Luther's teachings were largely abandoned by the Lutheran church, Calvin's teachings were distorted by later generations of Calvinists. And Cranmer's teachings have largely been overlooked by the Church of England. Yet they represented a coherent systematic theology of church and state and they provided the basis for the subsequent structures which exist down to the present day. However, if Cranmer's views were once more to be recognized for what they are, namely an authentic strand of Anglicanism (and it is hard to imagine how that could be refused), then discussions about the present and future of the Church of England and the English state would face three very specific challenges.

a. Accuracy about the Supreme Governor

The first, which has been argued throughout this article, is that before we can discuss what it means today, we need to understand the concept of the monarch as 'Supreme Governor' in the sense in which it was put forward at the outset of the English Reformation. Whatever changes in the *expression* of that concept may have taken place since then, we cannot simply pretend it meant something entirely different without displaying either historical ignorance or arrogance. Otherwise we risk becoming the theological equivalent of Tweedledee and Tweedledum, convinced that a concept means 'exactly what we say it means, nothing more, nothing less'.

b. Reassessment of the Authority Structures

The second challenge is to recognize that disestablishment would undercut the authority structures of the entire Church of England. The limitation on the right of the monarch in Article XXXVII to preach and administer the sacraments is nowhere near as important in this respect as the fact that it is the monarch and *only the monarch* who has the right to rule the ecclesiastical estate with the ‘civil sword’. Any demand for obedience by bishops and other officers in the church is based entirely on this authority. When Article XXIII, *Of Ministering in the Congregation*, says that only those who have been ‘lawfully called’ may preach and minister the Sacraments in the congregation, it adds,

And those we ought to judge lawfully called and sent, which be chosen and called to this work by men who have publick authority given unto them in the Congregation, to call and send Ministers into the Lord’s vineyard.

Within the structures of Anglicanism, bishops are those ‘who have publick authority...to call and send’. But as Cranmer argued, and the Article reflects, that authority is ‘given unto them’ by the monarch, who alone derives it as of right from God. Bishops thus have only a *derived* authority with regard to the church, not an absolute authority, as is made clear by the ‘Homily Against Wilful Rebellion’, published in 1562—

The Holy Scriptures do teach most expressly, that our Saviour Christ himself, and his Apostles St. Paul and St. Peter, with others, were unto the Magistrates and higher powers...both obedient themselves, and did also diligently and earnestly exhort all other Christians to the like obedience unto their Princes and Governors: whereby it is evident that men of the clergy...as their successors, ought...to be obedient unto their Princes, and also to exhort all others unto the same. Our Saviour Christ, likewise...did by his example...confirm the same; expressly also forbidding his Apostles, and by them the whole clergy, all princely dominion over people and nations: and he and his holy Apostles likewise, namely, Peter and Paul, *did forbid unto all ecclesiastical Ministers dominion over the church of Christ.*²⁵

Disestablishment is, of course, entirely possible. But it should not be imagined that the Church of England can be disestablished without removing the theological buttress which supports the existing authority of the ecclesiastical

hierarchy. Where Canon A 6 says that 'The government of the Church of England...by archbishops, bishops, deans, provosts, archdeacons and the rest of the clergy and of the laity that bear office in the same is not repugnant to the Word of God' it adds the important words '*under the Queen's Majesty*'. Take away those words and the theological *raison d'être* of the rest of the hierarchy is challengeable *from within a strictly Anglican perspective*.

c. Doctrinal Discipline

The third challenge is to recognize that the process of desuetude with regard to monarchical authority has left an unfilled gap in terms of doctrinal discipline within the Anglican church. At every point the historical documents of the Church of England make it clear that it is the monarch who is ultimately responsible for driving away error and to whom bishops and every other church officer are answerable. But the reins have long since been dropped in this respect and it is abundantly clear that the Church of England has never had the structures, and no longer has the will, to take them up. Worst of all, Synodical government, allowing the doubtlessly willing, but manifestly theologically uninformed, to arbitrate on doctrinal matters has simply made matters vastly worse. We should not be surprised that a church which in terms of doctrinal discipline has effectively been a headless chicken since the seventeenth century has, since the twentieth, begun to run around like one. The uncomfortable fact is that the current doctrinal anarchy of the Church of England is a foretaste of what will come with disestablishment if no suitable, and theologically justifiable, structures are put in place before the event.

My own view is that Cranmer's vision for church and state under the authority of the Crown is naive about human possibilities and in any case questionable theologically. My own preference would be for a 'two kingdoms' model nearer to that of Martin Luther, with a high degree of separation between the gospel structures of the church and the legal authority of the state. But what we cannot have is Reformation Anglicanism without the Reformation monarchy. And if we are to have no king but Caesar we must make sure that the Church of England does not erect its own tyranny without either theological justification or restraint.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Diarmaid MacCulloch suggests that Henry was not in fact in love with Anne Boleyn at the time when he first sought his annulment, and so was not prompted by his desire for her. Much of the thinking behind this article was prompted by MacCulloch's brilliant *Thomas Cranmer* (London: Yale University Press, 1996)
- 2 Gerald Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1994), 78
- 3 Bray, 78
- 4 Bray, 78
- 5 Bray, 113-114
- 6 'Questions and Answers Concerning the Sacraments and the Appointment and Power of Bishops and Priests' in *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, Ed J E B Cox (Cambridge: The Parker Society, 1846, reproduced by Regent College Publishing), 116
- 7 Cox, 116
- 8 This is certainly the conclusion reached by Colin Buchanan in *Cut the Connection: Disestablishment and the Church of England* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1994) 14-15
- 9 Properly speaking, the post of Archbishop of Canterbury is exactly parallel to the post of Prime Minister and it is therefore perhaps somewhat anomalous that the latter should have a key role in appointing the former. Cranmer's view is that both are rightfully appointees of the monarch.
- 10 Cox, 116
- 11 Cox, 117
- 12 Cox, 116-117
- 13 'The Archbishop's Speech at the Coronation of Edward VI', Cox 127
- 14 Cox, 127
- 15 Cox 126
- 16 In this respect, the so-called 'Muslim Parliament' of England is a challenge to the Queen's authority at two levels, temporal and spiritual. I simply make the observation - I do not propose a resolution!
- 17 Bray, 322, emphasis added. Note that 'imperial' here reflects the Henrician understanding of England as an empire, not a later concept of the British Empire.
- 18 Cox, 219
- 19 By the 'Betting and Gaming Act', although some hold that it was initially repealed by the 'Statute Law Revision Act' of 1863
- 20 Though for how much longer, one genuinely begins to wonder.

21 Bray, 114

22 Bray, 322

23 Those who have any doubts may like to note that the Book of Common Prayer was substantially the work of one man under the authority of the King, and is still in use 450 years later. The Alternative Service Book was the product of Synodical Government and lasted just over twenty years.

24 Indeed, I find no evidence in Hooker's section on bishops and church governance in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* to suggest he had read, much less engaged with, Cranmer's understanding of the relationship between church and monarch. On the contrary, Hooker seems to view the monarch's authority as 'given' by the whole of society (including the church) rather than derived from God.

25 *The Homilies* (Lewes: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1986), 410, emphasis added. The Homilies are, of course, commended as 'godly and wholesome Doctrine' by Article XXXV, which is itself upheld, along with the other Articles, by Canons A2 and A5 of the Church of England.