

For AtheismUK

Time to Disestablish the Church of England

Taking the Church of England out of the UK Constitution and ending religious privilege

Guy Otten 16th Feb 2023

This paper refers primarily to the position in England rather than to Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (where the Church of England is not established)

AtheismUK, in common with other organisations such as the National Secular Society and HumanistsUK, has always promoted secularism, including disestablishment of the Church of England. Secularism is the separation of Church and state, and the removal of all religious privilege in our national and political life.

The National Secular Society states that the principles of secularism which protect and underpin many of the freedoms we enjoy are:

1. Separation of religious institutions from state institutions and a public sphere where religion may participate, but not dominate.
2. Freedom to practice one's faith or belief without harming others, or to change it or not have one, according to one's own conscience.

3. Equality so that our religious beliefs or lack of them don't put any of us at an advantage or a disadvantage.

To insist on secularism and fairness between different religions, beliefs and philosophies is also to hold to the principle that it is a matter of the entitlement of every person in the UK to the same level of respect for his or her beliefs as other people (always providing those beliefs do no harm to others) and not to be disadvantaged in any way by unwarranted privilege granted to others.

What is Church establishment and privilege?

As a result of historical events in the 16th century, the Church of England is established and has a privileged role in England. Other churches and religious bodies also share some of the same privileges, so that it is difficult to separate out the specifically Church of England privileges from those also shared by other denominations and faiths.

Establishment has been defined as 'power, privilege and authority that one set of persons possesses, that is not accountable and not available to others'. These are its main features in the UK:

- The Church of England has 26 bishops as of right sitting in the House of Lords. (No one is elected to the House of Lords except - ludicrously – hereditary peers filling a vacancy). From a United Kingdom point of view, it is also inappropriate for bishops of a

Church in just one part of the UK to be sitting in part of the legislature which makes laws for the whole of the UK.

- The Monarch is head of the Church and has to be a communicant member of the Church
- Coronations of new monarchs are performed by the Archbishop of Canterbury in a ceremony that is strongly Christian in nature (as well as feudal!)
- Each local education authority has a Standing Advisory Council on Religious education (SACRE) which advises many state schools on religious education. The Church of England has a privileged place and enhanced voting powers in these bodies
- The Church of England (along with other religious bodies) is not just permitted to run a large number of faith schools, but also these schools are maintained fully by the state¹. Further, Schools assemblies which are normally of a broadly Christian character as well as religious education is made compulsory in all ordinary state schools by the Education Acts².
- The spread of faith schools is such that non-Christian parents in some areas have little choice other than to send their children to a local faith school because no secular school is available

¹ Voluntary aided schools may meet some capital costs of premises

² It is possible for a school to apply to a SACRE for a determination allowing this daily worship to be other than broadly Christian

- The Church of England (along with other religious bodies) by virtue of its charitable status receives state subsidies funded by the UK taxpayer, not just for activities which benefit the public, such as running a food bank, but also for proselytising its own faith beliefs (notwithstanding that the majority of UK taxpayers do not hold such beliefs)³
- These same state subsidies extend to social service by the Church and other religious bodies which are useful to the public. Some atheists argue that, even in these cases, the provider's religious beliefs inevitably have a propagandising effect
- Public remembrance and ceremonies are usually led by Church of England clerics even where, such as in Remembrance Day itself, they are essentially secular ceremonies for everyone, not just for Anglicans. These clerics have been known to side-line humanists who wish to participate.⁴
- The Church is embedded in many of our leading colleges and universities. Most Oxbridge colleges have as a consequence of their history clerical Dons and Church of England chapels, which enhances the status of the Church of England in those

³ They may also receive state support for the maintenance of listed or architecturally exceptional buildings

⁴ My personal experience in Manchester

essentially public institutions beyond what is warranted by the level of the Church's support in 2023.

- New Government Ministers who are members of the Church of England are sworn in before the monarch ahead of ministers who are non-Anglican Christians (category 2). They are followed (category 3) by ministers who are religious but non-Christian; and (in category 4), humanist and atheist ministers are sworn in last of all!
- The Prime Minister has some influence in appointing Archbishops and Bishops.
- Technically parliament can legislate for the Church of England (but has delegated its powers to the Church since 1919). This delegation could be reversed.
- Local Authorities and Parliament usually begin their full proceedings with a prayer by a cleric. In Parliament as the House of Commons does not have enough seats for every MP, an MP who does not want to attend the prayers at the start of the sitting may not get a seat
- Chaplaincy provision in hospitals, prisons, universities and the Armed Forces is usually led by the Church of England chaplains and Christian chaplains predominate although the populations they serve (especially in prisons and universities) are predominately (or increasingly) non-Christian

- The Church of England has a number of exemptions from Human rights and equalities legislation

The Church of England is thus embedded in our constitution and national life while other religions bodies have privileges too: religious privilege proliferates in our national life.

By privilege I mean legal or embedded rights and advantages that are not afforded equally to everyone in Society, but are restricted to one set of people or institutions. The Monarch is the ultimate example of privilege.

What's the problem?

Firstly lack of support: historically the Church of England reflected the views of the majority of English citizens, and sought to provide a unifying moral community for the people. However, belief in Christianity has been weakening and falling, especially during the last 60 years. Following the release of the 2021 census results we now know that only 46% of the population of England & Wales describe themselves as Christian (down from 59% in 2011), while those professing no religion have risen to 37% (up from 25% in 2011)

Other religions accounted for 11% in 2021, with 6% non-respondents to this voluntary question.

Thus support, not just for the Church of England, but for Christianity as a whole, has fallen substantially and is now below 50%. Even this

figure does not reflect active membership of the churches, which is at a far lower level. That of the Church of England is lower still.

Further, even out of the minority of people who do accept the identity of member of the Church of England, the majority *of them* have only a residual commitment to the Church of England, one that is surely too weak to found the power and privilege the Church continues to have.

To attempt to justify an established church with the kind of privilege, power and status that the Church of England possesses requires (at least) the active support of a good proportion of the population.

So, the establishment of the Church is wrong firstly because of lack of public support for it.

Secondly it is also wrong in principle. Fundamental to the principled secular case is our opposition to all privilege given to any faith (or other) group, and the consequent inappropriate power that the Church has in public affairs. Giving any person or group in society any kind of privilege is fundamentally unfair without a very good reason and continuing democratic consent.

Thirdly: there is a strong moral basis for disestablishment: The Church of England has increasingly become out of step with the national understanding of what is right and moral. This is dramatically shown in the Church's struggle with fundamental

secular moral standards such as the equality of men and women, the equality of LGTB+ people, the legalisation of humanist marriage, the need for an assisted dying law and the inappropriateness of the church (and other religious bodies) running faith schools where children are vulnerable to indoctrination. Indeed, the church's historical claim to offer moral guidance and be the conscience of the nation is no longer generally accepted.

There is a **fourth objection in principle** for atheists and those not convinced of the truth of god-belief. This is that the religious story on which Christianity - and the Church of England - is based is a mythology which does not accord with what is known of reality. If we are to adopt a common story on which to base our institutions, it should be one that is demonstrably true.

Anglican Support for Disestablishment

We can note that there are senior Anglicans like Dr Jonathan Chaplin⁵ and Martyn Percy who are calling for disestablishment from within the Church of England. These two have both written advocating Disestablishment and they spoke at an online seminar organised by the National Secular Society on 15th February 2023. They answer worries about disestablishment Anglicans may have and argue that disestablishment can deliver benefits to the Church.

⁵ Author of 'Beyond Establishment'

The Reform

So, it is time to disestablish the Church of England by removing it from the constitution⁶. Such a reform will involve the abolition of much religious privilege. There should be a complete separation of Church and State⁷.

Religious bodies could then freely act without having unjustifiable advantages in national life; they would compete in the field of ideas equally with other religious and non-religious bodies and belief systems.

Parliament would no longer have the right to interfere in or regulate the affairs of the Church of England just as it does not in other religious bodies, as long as they respect the law, such as that regarding non-discrimination, and as long as they do not harm people. Children have been shown to be in need of protection in recent decades *from* churches! Current exemptions from Equality legislation should be removed.

The monarch should no longer be the Head of the Church, or be required to be an Anglican; the monarch's own freedom of belief should be respected! A monarch's coronation should be a fully secular occasion, not invoking a god's blessing or appointment; it

⁶ I note the Green Party advocates Disestablishment in Paragraph 602 of their Policies for a Sustainable Society

⁷ Again the Gren Party advocates this in paragraph PA 601

should not be conducted in any church (while not excluding religious leaders offering their support).

No faith should be permitted in principle to run a publicly funded school. Specific religious instruction should not take place in publicly funded schools. Only general education about the range of religious and other beliefs children will face in life should be taught in schools to enable them to navigate through life in a diverse belief society (as is now the situation in Wales).

Indoctrination of a child is the exposing of that child to one faith's message in such a way as to attempt to ensure the child grows up in that faith. A secular approach finds such indoctrination in (or outwith) any school to be a violation of the child's right to freedom of belief, notwithstanding the right of parents to choose the kind of education to give their children, or the provisions of the 1950 ECHR, Protocol 1, Article 2⁸.

Bishops sitting as of right should be removed from the House of Lords and the priority and privilege given to the Church of England (and to a lesser extent other religious bodies) in all areas of national life including in government, the Health Service, prisons, the armed forces and the media should be removed. Chaplaincy staffing

⁸ "No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."

provision in those institutions should be reformed to reflect the general makeup of the populations they serve.

Tax Law and Charity Law should be reformed to withdraw charitable status (and its consequential taxpayer funding) from religious bodies especially for their specific faith activities. Even faith run activities which are not proselytising, but which benefit the public as a whole are problematic as they may cause at least a subconscious proselytising influence. The abolition of religious charitable status alone could save public funds.

I acknowledge that religious folk want to engage in useful work to benefit the public, but would prefer that this be done either in public service or through a non-religious charity.

These reforms would end religious privilege, disestablish the church, and contribute to a fairer society of equal respect for the beliefs of every UK resident.

I acknowledge and am grateful for the advice and comments of John Coss in this article.

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