

ARTICLE

Kenotic Ecclesiology and the Disestablishment of the Church of England under the Reign of Charles III

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Abstract

Coronations in Great Britain previously offered an occasion for national civic and spiritual renewal. However, the recent crowning of Charles III threw a spotlight on some of the deepening dissonance, diversity and divisions within British society. This paper is an ‘in principle’ argument for change and development. As the clamour for constitutional reform in the United Kingdom continues, and the awkwardness of Church of England bishops sitting in the House of Lords becomes more apparent, the time is ripe to reconsider disestablishment. In particular, the power and privilege of one denomination over all others is interrogated in relation to a kenotic ecclesiology, and which may now require the intentional divesting of kingly power: not clinging to status any longer, but self-emptying and embracing equality.

Keywords: authority; bishops; disestablishment; equality; establishment; humility; kenotic; leadership; monarchy; parliament; power

A Personal Preamble

Oxford College high table dinners can consist of quirky conversations with experts in their field, but who are curiously wedded to traditions that seem at odds with their stated academic views. Very-left-of-centre-but-also-anti-woke is not uncommon. I have dined with dons who are Marxists yet admired Thatcher, and ardent atheists who adore choral evensong and love the mellifluous sound of Rowan Williams’ voice, but otherwise opine that Radio 4’s ‘Thought for the Day’ should be consigned to the scrapheap.

A recent encounter at one such dinner had me seated next to a leading political scientist extolling their die-hard republican and anti-religious positions. But as it happens, we found ourselves discussing the funeral of the queen that had occurred only some weeks earlier, which, to the surprise of the political scientist, they self-confessed to finding it deeply moving. Their one caveat was the sermon, with

my donnish diner opining that the homily misappropriated the queen and portrayed her as an adherent of some ‘members-only Christian Club’. In so doing, the sermon apparently missed the opportunity to present the late queen as a true internationalist – a mother and grandmother to all nations, embodying civic duty and selfless service for all humanity.

Parking my reservations on this critique of the sermon (soup arrived) the topic of conversation turned to the coronation. My fellow-diner’s opening line was ‘well, I don’t much care for all the liturgy, pomp, pageantry and ceremonies, but it had better not dispense with Handel’s “Zadok the Priest” – they surely won’t drop that for some kind of bonkers-modern-inclusive-woke-clap-trap?’

Naturally, I asked if Handel’s anthem celebrating the hereditary right to rule was really consistent with their republican sympathies?¹ Zadok was a priest by virtue of his bloodline (the first book of Chronicles records he is descended from Aaron). Zadok’s sons were priests too – by virtue of their birth. King Solomon, whom Zadok anointed, was the son of King David.

There was a world of theocracy. The divine right to reign came via inheritance. Priests, likewise, hailed from ruling patrimonial dynasties. Meritocracy and democracy were no match for genealogies and ontological purity. (Note, no Taliban theocracy ever enjoyed such privilege.) The lyrics of Handel’s Coronation Anthem come from the first book of Kings (1.34-45):

Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king.

And all the people rejoiced and said:

God save the King! Long live the King! God save the King!

May the King live for ever. Amen. Hallelujah.

So I asked my companion if priesthood and monarchy (i.e., the right to rule) could be genetically inherited? There was an ensuing guffaw and splutter over the soup, with predictable protestations. My dining companion, as a committed non-religious republican, emphatically stated that the right to rule and reign couldn’t possibly be passed down a bloodline (male heirs only, note). The whole notion was promptly denounced as absurd and unfair. We agreed that the idea of divine power flowing through some elite genealogy would lead to autocracy and theocracy, not democracy.

This was, of course, precisely what Charles I had gone to war with Parliament over during the 1640s. For Charles I, defying the king was tantamount to defying God. Yet following the execution of Charles I in 1649, Oliver Cromwell’s hastily constructed republic merely replaced such confections of divine and human power with another kind of theocracy – one rooted in credal purity. Virtually all the English experiments

¹The biblical text recording the anointing of King Solomon has been read in the crowning of every English monarch – and later British – since the coronation of King Edgar in 973. George Frederic Handel composed his setting for the coronation of George II in 1727. The lyrics for Handel’s anthem remain the same, even if the monarch is female.

in religious reformation have discovered that deity, domination, divine-human conflation and democracy do not make for an easy blend.

Coronations – Queries and Quirks

The coronation of Charles III on 6 May 2023 followed the long-established traditional form of the liturgy, albeit with modest accommodations and nods towards modernity. Other faith leaders were intentionally present as features, and there was even a small speaking part for Cardinal Vincent Nichols – the first time a Roman Catholic Archbishop has been invited to contribute at a coronation for some 500 years. Otherwise, the oaths, prayers and liturgy for the coronation were left unchanged.

Yet for the purpose of this article, the adjustments in the coronation were fairly minimal, and largely a matter of symbolism and ‘optics’. Listing these need not detain us here, as I have described these changes elsewhere, and they were largely cosmetic in character. The underlining, unchanging character of the liturgy was left unaltered.² The coronation of Charles III combined colourful pageantry with civic potential – past and present blending with tradition and innovation. Many came away from Westminster Abbey with a sense of reassuring continuity. In a world of transition and turbulence, some things remain enduringly steadfast, and perhaps eternal. The coronation is presented as a legitimizing ancient rite almost unchanged since the time of King Edgar. Or perhaps Zadok and Solomon. To others, the coronation presented as being progressive and well adapted for the twenty-first century.

Coronations have not always required the Archbishop of Canterbury. William the Conqueror was crowned by the Archbishop of York, and Edward II by the Bishop of Winchester. Mary I refused to be crowned by the then (Protestant) Archbishop Cranmer, and chose another bishop. Elizabeth I was crowned by the Bishop of Carlisle, but only because the other bishops were either dead, too old or infirm, unacceptable to the queen, or simply unwilling. The Archbishop of Canterbury refused to recognize William III and Mary II, so the coronation was conducted by the Bishop of London.

Anglo-Saxon monarchs were relatively flexible about their coronation venue, with Bath Abbey, Winchester Cathedral and even Kingston-upon-Thames favoured as locations. Henry II chose Gloucester Cathedral, but also opted for an even more stately coronation rite at Westminster, four years after his first. The role of English bishops in these coronations was considerable, but now strikes many as somewhat jarring for the twenty-first century.

The most senior prelate in the Church of England is always the Archbishop of Canterbury. If that office holder cannot participate, then the order of precedence for the coronation falls to the Archbishop of York, then to the Bishops of London, Durham and Winchester in that order. Granted, liturgies, when conducted well, are a matter of military precision, and precedence and power is therefore unavoidably

²Martyn Percy, ‘The Coronation of Charles III—Subjects and Objects: In Choosing to Look Backwards Rather Than Forwards, the Grand Occasion Served Only to Shore Up Establishment Power, *Prospect*, 9 May 2023. Available at: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/monarchy/61334/coronation-king-charles-westminster-abbey>

manifest. The numbers of Church of England bishops visibly present at the coronation was noticeable, while ecumenism appeared to be confined to singular representative presence.

For Elizabeth II's coronation in 1952, special court proceedings were set up to establish and vet who had the right to be present, and what role they had.³ In the case of the clergy, the court accepted the claim of the Bishops of Durham and Bath and Wells to be beside the queen through the entire coronation ritual. The Dean of Westminster established his claim to advise the queen on the coronation, as his predecessors had done. There is even a red leather book with guidance and advice for this – the *Liber Regalis* – which is a kind of medieval manual for coronations kept by Westminster Abbey. It contains guidance and advice on how to run the event – a kind of manual – that has apparently been in use for over 1000 years.

Similar to an ordination or consecration, a bible (including the apocrypha) was presented to the monarch. That duty was performed by the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, which was a novel ecumenical gesture. Holy Communion was celebrated, with special prayers said. The monarch is anointed. *Veni Sanctus Spiritus* is sung. The monarch is robed and vested with social-sacramental symbols. Small wonder that the coronation liturgy is sometimes referred to as the Church of England's 'eighth sacrament'. The Bible readings put everyone in their place. The Epistle was from 1 Pet. 2.13-17 ('obey and respect those who govern you') and Mt. 22.15-22 ('render to Caesar what is Caesar's...').

The Coronation Oath Act of 1688 required the sovereign to swear an oath. In 1953 (and now mindful of the Anglican Communion and Commonwealth in 2023), the queen promised to 'govern the Peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Pakistan and Ceylon'. The list of nations and dominions list was of course shorter in 2023. However, with other oaths sworn, we encountered some further social dissonance (it might just about have worked in 1953, but rather jarred in 2023). The Archbishop asked the monarch:

Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel? Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law? Will you maintain and preserve inviolable the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England? And will you preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them?

Granted, the monarch also swears an entirely separate oath to preserve ecclesial governance in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. But this oath is taken before the coronation, which leaves the liturgy entirely dependent on the position, power and privileges of the Church of England. Clearly this is an uncomfortable and awkward moment requiring some explication in a multi-faith and increasingly secular society,

³There was no court to arbitrate attendees for Charles III's coronation, as it was handled by a Cabinet Office.

and one within the devolved nations of the United Kingdom. It is hard to justify, although the coronation of Charles III did include an exchange of greetings with faith leaders at the close of the rite.

An Apologia

Let me offer a personal confession and act of repentance at this point. I have, for most of my ordained and academic life, been an irenic advocate for the establishment of the Church of England.⁴ Through a blend of ecclesiology, theology and the sociology of religion, I have promoted a line of thinking that endorses the position of national churches in Europe and other parts of the world, and the role of an established church in England. I confess that I have tended to turn a blind eye to the privileges, status and inequalities this also confers, buying into the argument that non-Christian faiths prefer some form of official religious representation in the House of Lords (i.e., the legislature of Parliament) rather than none. I confess that I have interpreted this as a form of imposed inclusivity, but not paid attention to the inherent hierarchical order that this maintains within the establishment.

The rest of this essay is, in effect, an act of repentance. I think the emerging dissonance, diversity and division in society are highly problematic for an established church. I have therefore come to a view that for good social, cultural and theological reasons, the Church of England should be disestablished. Better still, with good theology, it could disestablish itself – choose to set aside its position and privilege among the elites of establishment, and take its place with other denominations and faiths in society.⁵ There are 26 bishops who sit – by right – in the House of Lords. The only other country in the world where religious ministers sit in the legislature is Iran.⁶

Defenders of the establishment in England will point to the theocracy of Iran and the democracy of the United Kingdom as making the difference. This is, however, no defence for the bishops, since they acquire their role, power and authority by virtue of no proper democratic process. Their presence in the House of Lords is not through meritocracy, but by a thin claim to an establishment that supports their divine right. Bishops are unregulated, unaccountable and unimpeachable. There is no counterweight to episcopal mercurial, arbitrary and inconsistent decisions. There is no appeal. Bishops in the Church of England primarily operate from a theocratic template, yet also have a privileged and hierarchical position within a democratic chamber. Being there of right, unelected and a lack of clarity of what or who they represent is increasingly untenable. Furthermore, they are only drawn from

⁴M. Percy, 'Opportunity Knocks: Church, Nationhood and Establishment', in M. Chapman, J. Maltby and W. Whyte (eds.), *The Established Church: Past, Present and Future* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2011), pp. 26-38.

⁵See M. Percy, 'With the Church of England dying, how much longer can we justify having bishops in the House of Lords?' *Prospect*, pp. 34-40, 6 October/November 2022; and M. Percy, 'Why Charles's coronation could be a spiritual flop'. *Prospect*, 26 April 2023. 'The coronation of Charles III—Subjects and object' in May (on-line only): <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/monarchy/61334/coronation-king-charles-westminster-abbey>.

⁶There is the Tynwald (Parliament) on the Isle of Man where the Anglican Bishop sits as of right in that assembly, but we also note that the Isle of Man is not a country.

England, and not the other devolved nations of the UK. Yet the bishops speak on and participate in legislative, moral and political matters for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Problematic Dynamics of Power

In David Nicholl's magisterial *Deity and Domination*⁷ the author carefully sets out how notions of dominion, majesty and might in the secular-public sphere rely upon theological weighting. The combination of imagery, symbols, words, roles, offices and rituals combine to reinforce hierarchical patterns of dominion, in which the state appeals to God for legitimacy in hegemony. King, Lord, Judge – the monarch and Church of England bishops combine all three – make it possible for theocratic and theological constructions of reality to impose themselves on the clergy and laity of the church, and wider civil society. There is currently no mechanism for challenging or appealing against the decision of a bishop, and this juridical power can find expression in injustices perpetrated that would be subject to scrutiny and overturn in civil courts.⁸

Nicholls' work is alive to the theological freighting that occurs within episcopal and monarchical forms of governance, with its reliance upon theological constructions of reality that emphasize power and sovereignty, inevitably leading to a culture that rewards deference, and is complicit and compliant in the face of domination. Yet somehow, many of the emergent structures and instruments of ecclesial governance may seem both beneficial and benign to those inside the Church. Concepts of paternalism and pastoral care, for example, sit uncomfortably alongside the coercive regime of aims, objectives, outcomes and measurable growth. The Church of England occupies both sides of the fence in its relationship with clergy and laity. The ambivalence about the power of the laity and the very limited leverage that ordinary clergy can exercise will do little to untangle the matrices of deity and domination inherent in any episcopal role within the Church of England.

Moreover, on which person of the trinity does a bishop model their identity? Is it the distant autocratic father (i.e., responsible for edicts and judgments); the person of Jesus (i.e., preacher, teacher, embodiment of compassion, etc.); or the Holy Spirit (i.e., mercurial, unpredictable and unimpeachable)? Bishops in the Church of England are above constraint either by laity, clergy or General Synod. A system of ecclesiastical law, in which the bishops are able, all at once, to interpret and apply, and act as prosecutor, judge and jury, can be experienced as a form of despotic feudalism. Indeed, it is hard to recall a Communist regime where a complainant or defendant enjoyed fewer rights. The entanglement of episcopacy and monarchy may now be largely symbolic. However, the power of the democratic state to reform the monarchy has left episcopacy with the residue of its monarchical privileges and powers.

⁷D. Nicholls, *Deity and Domination: Images of God and the State in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁸Complaints relating to the fostering of an ecclesial bullying culture under Archbishop Welby's tenure have been widely aired. See: <https://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/isb-writes-formal-dispute-resolution-notice/>

Within a hierarchical church that is essentially contested in terms of identity, challenge, scrutiny and accountability will invariably be over some horizon (i.e., perpetually out of reach, remaining aloof and ever-distant). Monarchical and episcopal power are inherently anti-democratic in character. The former expects obedience and demands deference, such that the illusion of collaborative democracy will require determined and persistent prophetic deconstruction. The power-dynamics of General Synod plays this out in every session, with the rawness of revolt and resistance consistently pasteurized and homogenized – often to gild the goal of some fictional construct of unity-in-diversity. In truth, such cultures only serve to support the status quo, the power interests that benefit from that stability, and to emasculate the potential for truthful epiphanies to emerge that might challenge the prevailing powers that are hidden within symbolic hierarchies.

One of the subtlest self-deceptions in the exercise of power is believing we are always acting in the best interests of others. Laudable selflessness can quickly turn inwards, with acts of service becoming the means of maintaining patrimony and power. The Church of England finds itself in an invidious position here. A bishop or synod that postpones a decision on marriage or gender equality may well think they are modelling some of the permissive properties of *adiaphora* – that is to say, legitimate disagreement on matters where religion does not compel a view one way or the other. Yet most members of the Church of England, and our wider population, approve of equal marriage and women clergy. Only a handful do not.

So promoting neutrality in order to keep the peace is neither right nor fair. For example, and as a parallel, around 13 per cent of the UK population still smoke tobacco. But it would be odd to conclude that 13 per cent of all pub lounges or train carriages must now be reserved for smokers – let alone non-smokers also pressured into sharing such spaces. Yet this is precisely the logic that the Church of England applies to minority views on sexuality and gender that the majority find toxic, alienating and harmful.

The Church of England would attempt accommodations or opt-outs on ethnicity or disability. Yet it continues to legitimize discrimination on sexuality and gender. In fact, it honours such discrimination, and invests it with equality, or special exemption. This is puzzling. Namely, conferring power, status and privilege on those who would deny that to others. Nobody, on experiencing injustice and discrimination because of their race, disability, sexuality or gender, would expect their subjugation to be socially accommodated and legally affirmed. Splitting the difference between opposing views on various issues simply in order to maintain unity can simply legitimize ongoing repression, and is not constructive. True wisdom relies on moral courage. Churches, like all institutions, often struggle with such essentials.

Balance and neutrality have their limits. Consider the wisdom of King Solomon (1 Kgs 3.16-28), who boldly adjudicated between two mothers who had staked a claim over one newborn child, following the sudden death of the other infant. Solomon did not manage this dispute by proposing some kind of co-parenting arrangement until the child reached an age where it could discern its real biological mother – let alone choose according to preference.

The time may now be ripe to 'level up' and share ecclesiastical power and privilege. If proof of the problem were still needed, the recent national census in the

UK, with its statistics on religious affiliation, made for uncomfortable reading. For the first time in a census for England and Wales, less than half of the population (46.2 per cent, or 27.5 million people) described themselves as Christian. This represents a 13.1 percentage point decrease from 2011. As the *Church Times* noted,⁹ Christianity is now a minority religion. The paradox for members of the Church of England is that while the population of England is primarily pro-equality and democratic, the established church remains rooted in hierarchies and autocracy.

Twenty-six bishops sitting in the House of Lords will argue they often make valuable contributions to various debates. But it is harder to justify them being there by some divine right, just as the right of hereditary peers to rule and reign in a democracy is jarring. The bishops can only represent the interests of their denomination. Try as they might to justify their inclusion and interventions, they are present in the debating chamber as of right, and with no democratic mandate. As such, any speaking up for an issue, region or cause has to be tempered with the realization that their presence and permission to speak is conferred through a theocratic and hierarchical framework. They are not there on merit, or even by choice. Theirs is an inherited power and authority. Hereditary peers, since the reforms of Prime Minister Tony Blair – which allowed a small handful to remain in the House of Lords – must elect their representation from among themselves by ballot. Parliament could easily legislate again, and remove the right of bishops to vote as Lords Spiritual. Prayers led in the House of Commons (not by bishops) would include members of the Upper Chamber. Such aspects of disestablishment, undertaken sensibly, are actually quite simple.

The twenty-first century already has to battle hard against oligarchy and autocracy. One simply cannot escape the dissonant distaste for an unelected bishop in the House of Lords trying to critique the conduct of some distant foreign regime ruled by elites that are also unelected, and have no democratic accountability. Particularly when the Church of England is out of step with the rest of the country on equality, gender and sexuality. The Church of England continues to deny basic employment rights to its own clergy.

Humility as Grounding

The concept of ecclesial humility is therefore a timely issue to which the Church of England in the twenty-first century needs to return. Lessons were learned by the confessing churches of Germany, many branches of the Roman Catholic Church over sexual abuse, and the base communities springing up from liberation theology. Defenders of establishment for the Church of England may want to point to *Faith in the City*¹⁰ and other work of this ilk. However, the paternalism that such work

⁹*Church Times*, 29 November 2022, p. 3.

¹⁰*Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985) was authored by the Archbishop of Canterbury's (Robert Runcie) Commission on Urban Priority Areas. One of the conclusions of the report was that much of the blame for growing spiritual and economic poverty and desolation in British inner cities was due to government policies. The report sought to 'examine the strengths, insights, problems and needs of the Church's life and mission in Urban Priority Areas and, as a result, to reflect on the challenge which God may be making to Church and Nation: and to make recommendations to appropriate bodies' (p. ix).

presumes is now, arguably, undermining the capacity of the Church of England to make meaningful interventions in public life. If a church enshrines inequality and lends legitimacy to discrimination, it then becomes extremely hard for bishops to address public issues in a convincing manner that engages on such fronts – without encountering significant difficulty. That the Church of England has secured opt-outs on the Human Rights Act 1998 is still a major impediment to its public credibility. Although Parliament might have reluctantly agreed to such opt-outs a quarter of a century ago, the exemptions now look anachronistic and even abusive, and constitute a major blight on the social, moral and political concept of equality.

Disestablishment – voluntarily undertaken by the Church of England – would help change perceptions, and I believe would now enhance its mission and ministry. The law of the land in the UK grants religious freedom, but awkwardly, not religious equality. The Church of England could and should, I think, take its place with other denominations and faith, and petition for its public theology from a level playing field. This will require humility, not majesty. It requires grounding, not elevation. It certainly requires the setting aside of powers and privileges – reserved as of right to only one church – in order to serve the whole nation. The Church of England can still be the people's church and a national institution. It does not need establishment for this, as the Church of Scotland pointedly illustrates. Indeed, no other paradigms for national churches across Europe require the privileges of establishment.

One could go further here, and argue that the Church of England, which is exempt from regulation and day-to-day scrutiny, would benefit itself, its stakeholders and reputation by placing itself under the common law of the land, rather than interpreting and applying its own legal system (i.e., ecclesiastical law) under its current exceptionalism. The episodic and dispositional corruption that frequently blights the Church of England – financial, safeguarding, abuse and the like – would be better handled by external independent regulatory body with some proper legal apparatus. At present, virtually all scandals in the church are subject to 'independent internal investigation' (note the oxymoron) – with the subjects for scrutiny invariably setting the terms of reference for their own investigation. Effectively, the Church of England sets and marks its own homework, and awards its own grades. There is no appeal against this. Yet increasingly this is no longer acceptable to the public, who regard such self-serving conduct as inherently corrupt. Self-humbling is a neglected ecclesial paradigm. The Church of England now needs to work towards this, lest it become even more identified with unaccountable privilege and power. Without committing to this journey, the identity, mission and ministry of the church may be perceived as only being concerned with its establishment, and so socially aloof. Humility is the quality of being humble. But in our person-centred-fulfilment-therapeutically-attuned culture, we often conflate humility with humiliation. We assume low self-regard and unworthiness to be debasing. Yet in religion, humility is rooted in perspective and submission – and being 'un-served': a liberation from consciousness of the self; a form of *temperance* that is neither having pride (or haughtiness) nor indulging in self-deprecation. True humility comes, ironically, from a deep inner self-confidence, and attends to the needs of and the valuing of others. The humble person is not preoccupied with themselves; but rather, occupied with the needs of others. Humiliation, in contrast, is imposed on us externally, and it frequently shames us.

True humility is ultimately unattainable, and real humiliation undesirable. Yet both terms are linked to the words *humus* and *hubris*. ‘Humus’ means being earthed, and the humble person is ultimately a *grounded* person: sure of their being, so not above themselves – and knows they are not above others, no matter what giftedness, rank or status they hold. ‘Hubris’, in contrast, is self-inflated, puffed-up self-perception; and it lacks grounded-ness. Grounding is fundamental, as Justine Allain Chapman notes:

Humility is the quality that . . . all mature Christians grow into; a quality where a deep sense of inner dignity and value is palpable to others and brings them solace, it is a fruit of the Spirit, sometimes translated as ‘gentleness’. It can be misunderstood as a false modesty of doing yourself down and as such can be quite manipulative, in refusing to allow others to express gratitude or admiration, for example. Humble people are grounded (which means lowly, on the ground or earth). They are secure in themselves and in touch with their own vulnerability as human beings but also fully aware of their strengths¹¹

Research from Harvard Business School – a famous study and essay from Jim Collins at the turn of the twenty-first century – found that many of the top organizations and institutions in the world were led by *humble* people.¹² According to Collins, such leaders possessed humility and fierce resolve, combining self-understanding, awareness, openness, passion and perspective. Collins’ findings affirmed some of the sentiment expressed in the New Testament. Jesus tells us that ‘those who exalt themselves will be humbled; but those who humble themselves will be exalted’ (Mt. 23.12). The Letter of James (4.6) reminds us that ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’. An account in John 13 recalls a night when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and in so doing, elected to serve, humbling himself.

In one of the most remarkable theological meditations of the last fifty years, Daniel Hardy and David Ford reflect on how the ecology of praise, joy and laughter is an essential component in the facing of evil, suffering and death.¹³ Hardy and Ford highlight the inadequacy of stoicism, and call for a deeper theological response to the wickedness, malice and horror that individuals and communities may face. They argue that joy and praise – rooted in our acknowledgement of the overwhelming abundance of God – can help us to face the darkness that threatens to envelope us, and address trials and tribulations with a different perspective. This means anticipating the flow of the Spirit of God in our lives, and uniquely embodied in the life of Jesus, which expresses the ultimate overflow of praise to God, and the

¹¹Justine Allain Chapman, *The Resilient Disciple: A Lenten Journey from Adversity to Maturity* (London: SPCK, 2018), p. 111.

¹²See Jim Collins, ‘Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve’, *Harvard Business Review* (2001), pp. 66-76; cf., Rob Nielsen, Jennifer Marrone and Holly Slay, ‘A New Look at Humility: Exploring the Humility Concept and its Role in Socialized Charismatic Leadership’, *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 17.1 (2010), pp. 33-43; and J. Andrew Morris, Celeste M. Brotheridge and John C. Urbanski, ‘Bringing Humility to Leadership: Antecedents and Consequences of Leader Humility’, *Human Relations* 58 (2005), pp. 1323-50.

¹³Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* (London: DLT, 1984).

most manifest intensification of the good news of the kingdom. Jesus is, literally, the body language of God.

To some extent, the self-conscious kenosis of Christ anticipates this in the way of the cross. But 'self-emptying' here is not a kind of resigned stoicism. It continues to be, in Jesus, a journey of praising, knowing and joy; but which also faces evil and suffering. Golgotha is not for himself; it is for us. It is a kind surrender. But not of stoicism and self-resignation; it is a surrender to God, into whose hands Jesus ultimately commits himself. The cross is therefore also an act of will and resistance too, for it refuses to abandon hope.

So Hardy and Ford remind us that while patience, endurance and bravery are all important (in discipleship, ecclesial reification and characterful leadership), this stoicism will not be sufficient as a proper theological response to the forces of evil that are sometimes faced, and the suffering that results. Daringly, they argue that stoicism can prevent us from really facing the intensification of shame that sometimes grips institutions and communities, causing them to transfer their blame to others. Here, they sagely suggest:

only joy can creatively oppose evil in all its perversion of both order and non-order; stoicism at best contains it, resists it and maintains order and dignity in the face of it.¹⁴

And so they argue, it is only the overwhelming abundance of God – and the proper response of joy and praise to this – that can truly address the darkness that threatens to envelope. To enter into an understanding of God's ecology is to see that in God, there is no darkness or light, but only one equal light. And so even demanding difficulty and apparent loss can be transfigured. This requires, however, a particular kind of faith, hope and trust for what will be, and for what is: who we are already before God. It is this kind of kenosis – a self-emptying in order to be filled with the joy of the Spirit, and the overwhelming abundance of God – that makes the way of servant leadership so demanding, and yet so very liberating. It is a different kind of existence to that of stoicism.¹⁵

Kenotic Ecclesiology

In view of this, where might we locate a Christian theology of humble ecclesiology? To be sure, no church or denomination is remotely like Jesus, or ever could be. But are there lessons in his being that we might learn from? Here, I turn to kenosis – a term that generally refers to the 'self-emptying' of Christ, and is an aspect of the doctrine of the incarnation. It is expressed most succinctly in the (so-called) 'Christological Hymn' found in Paul's letter to the Philippians (Phil. 2.6-11):

¹⁴Hardy and Ford, *Jubilate*, p. 141.

¹⁵However, see also Margaret Whipp, *The Grace of Waiting* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2017). Whipp argues for the virtue of watchful patience as one of the primary disciplines to be cultivated in addressing suffering, as well as discussing the shortcomings of stoicism.

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore, God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Here we are faced with an incomparable sense of God's creative restraint that ends in praise. Indeed, this call to humility and hope is rooted in the overwhelming abundance of God. The hymn follows on from a meditative soliloquy from Paul on the nature of character in Christian leadership and ecclesiology (Phil. 2.1-5):

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus . . .

Churches are to be, therefore, as Stanley Hauerwas notes, 'communities of character'.¹⁶ In such communities, people are being *disciplined* by the grace of God into the new life that God, in Christ, has claimed them for. Such communities are consciously renewed by the salvific action of God in Christ. This is kenotic in character. It is by following the one who 'emptied himself', that one discovers the

¹⁶S. Hauerwas, *Communities of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

foundation for humility, and the space for joy in others, and in God. Donald MacKinnon, commenting on the theology of Donald Baillie, states that:

in Christ God is revealed as submitting himself to the very substance of human life, in its inexorable finitude, in its precarious ambiguity, in its movement to despair.¹⁷

Correspondingly, those notions of omnipotence and omniscience – and that so afflict our ecclesiology and church leaders – are transformed by kenosis. Jesus becomes the obedient one. But the one who becomes obedient unto death; even when that death is totally unjust. The obedience must mean that the crucifixion is real; for in his humanity, Jesus must embody it all in its fullness – including despair. To be sure, Jesus was a leader, but at the same time highly self-aware of hierarchies, and sufficiently self-critical to act and preach in a way that might dissuade his followers from constructing yet another gradient of power and authority that legitimated domination. This, argues MacKinnon, leads the church to living ‘an *exposed* life; it is to be stripped of the kind of security that tradition, whether ecclesiological or institutional, easily bestows’.¹⁸

So, rather than attending to security and safety, underpinned by a fear or death, humiliation and annihilation, the church is asked to ‘let go and let God’. This means there is a potential unfaithfulness to the gospel when opposing any enemy or external threat that poses a risk to its very existence. As MacKinnon further notes, when the Christian God is endowed with the attributes of a human Caesar, the Church takes on the image of a ‘transcendent Caesar’ rather than the more fundamentally disruptive calling of embodying the ‘vulnerable Nazarene’. For MacKinnon:

From Christ there issues a continually repeated question, and his Church is his authentic servant only in so far as it allows that interrogation to continue. It is always easier to escape its remorseless probing: to take refuge in the security of a sharply defined orthodoxy, or to blur the riddling quality of its disturbing challenge by conformity to the standards of the age¹⁹

What this means in practice is that Christians are incorporated into Christ’s perpetual oblation. Christians are participative in the life of Christ, and in our own self-emptying, wilful descent and conscious path of humility, we are bound to an ecology of obedience rather than one of mere self-preserving resistance.²⁰

This, I should say, does not call the Church, or individuals or groups within the Church, to a life of passive acceptance or stoicism. It invites us to contemplate the

¹⁷Donald MacKinnon, ‘Reflections on Donald Baillie’s Treatment of the Atonement’ in D. Fergusson (ed.), *Christ, Church and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), pp. 115-21.

¹⁸Donald MacKinnon, *The Stripping of the Altars* (London: Fontana, 1969), p. 34.

¹⁹See John McDowell (ed.), *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2011), p. 264.

²⁰On this, see Jane Williams, *The Merciful Humility of God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

formation and habitation of the character of community or individual that is being afflicted or persecuted. But here, we are not asked to model weakness, but *meekness*.

There is a paradox at the heart of kenosis. It is not a kind of weary resignation in the face of the malign forces of fate. It is, rather, an act of determination and resolve; an exercise of deep power from within that chooses – in the example of God in Christ – to limit power and knowledge, but not to limit love, hope, joy and peace. The path of ecclesial development and leadership will be one of obedience, accepting that a conscious and deep form of humility will no longer privilege power and knowledge. Rather, these will be set aside in a continuous, wilful and generative life of humility, that will place others above the self. The self-limiting of power and knowledge allows love to both cover and hold those who need it most.

Indeed, I think many parents will understand something of this. What the child needs to experience is a parent with *some* power and *some* knowledge; but not too much, or else growth and individuation will be stifled. But this can only be fixed within a paradigm of unconditional love, that seeks to sustain and serve the ones we seek to nurture, and then set free.²¹

Only love can do this. As it frees, it binds us. There can be something apophatic about Christ's way of leadership: humility preferred to privilege.²² Kenotic ecclesiology then, is a form of collective and incorporative being that does not allow negativity to germinate. The self-emptying paradigm that is exemplified in Jesus leads to a humble kind of ecclesiology that serves others and befriends all, rather than merely seeing people as potential converts. As Chloe Lynch argues, the kenotic is a form of extraordinary self-giving friendship that Jesus models with his disciples, and with a wider public.²³ His meekness is magisterial. The one who reigns does so from a tree; his crown is made of thorns.

Looming Disestablishment?

In an economically depressed Britain, still limping on with some post-Covid wariness, the coronation clearly was an occasion for celebrating communities and the civic values that bind them together. Coronations have, over many centuries, evolved into a spiritual, civil and moral matrices for mutual affirmation. Yet this still highlighted awkward issues and nagging questions that no amount of pomp and pageant could camouflage. Most of these were concerned with inherited power and privilege. The coronation presented us with one denomination (and just English), that was central to a liturgy and parade by virtue of being the Church established as of right by God and law.

While that denomination might seek to serve king and country, poor and rich, city and shire, its track record on equality is seriously deficient. Labour MP Ben Bradshaw noted that the Church of England's recently announced stance on

²¹For a discussion of this that pays attention to gender, see Helen Zorgdrager, 'Risk-Takers in a World that Cries for Salvation: Behr-Sigel on Suffering and Kenosis', in Sarah Hinlicky and Aikatermi Pekridou (eds.), *A Communion of Love: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's Ecclesiology* (Geneva: WCC, 2017), pp. 127-39.

²²See Jane Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond: A Beginner's Guide to Christian Apophatic Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2018).

²³Chloe Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship* (London: Routledge, 2019).

LGBTQ+ issues – after five years of debate and ‘consultation’ – now placed it at odds with its purported vocation to serve its people. Bradshaw noted that the nation as a whole has become far more progressive and inclusive in character, and continuing to treat LGBTQ+ persons as second-class citizens meant the bishops were ‘heading for a major constitutional clash with parliament’. He sounded a warning note adding that ‘parliament will want to take a very close look at this ... the overwhelming view of MPs on both sides of the house is that it is not sustainable for our established church to be institutionally homophobic’.²⁴

The coronation held up a somewhat critical mirror to the Church of England, and what was reflected back became visible to all. The revolution of monarchical power and authority that began with Charles I and continued with Charles II will frame the reign of Charles III. The king may be the head of state, but is otherwise dependent upon and subject to Parliament. Democracy will not be replaced by the claim of a lineage to divine right. Church of England episcopal leadership is now significantly out of step with the prevailing culture. Bishops remain unaccountable, and wield their power and authority over the clergy and laity with very few checks and balances.

We referred earlier to David Nicolls’ prescient study of deity and domination. However, we note that the hierarchical structures in many institutions are supported by the ‘ontologization’ of management and bureaucracy.²⁵ For the Church of England, this means that the General Synod can only be permitted to act as feint simulacra of parliamentary democracy, and cannot be an authentic synodical gathering in any traditional sense. Irrespective of the issue – disagreements and a wide polarity of views on gender, sexuality, finances or safeguarding – ‘management’ will ensure that meetings of synod are carefully controlled and scripted. Management will make the rules, interpret them, and also control the agenda.

The veneer of democracy – General Synod – hardly helps. Rather like some iron-curtain party conference (i.e., also the government), dissent is carefully managed, usually muzzled, and can even be bought off. Here, General Synod is more akin to theatre, with costumes, roles, parts to play and scripts. Participation from the floor is permitted, but usually restricted to applause, short stage-to-audience interventions, and occasional dissent (not unlike pantomime). By the time the audience realizes it is participating in some ‘performative absolute’, the season comes to an end.²⁶

For sure, the path ahead for the Church of England is complex and challenging. The reification of power and authority in episcopacy is a problematic conflation of *opus hominum* and *opus dei*. ‘Lord Bishops’ who have no meaningful accountability in their rule, and participate in institutional hegemonic structures resistant to transparency and external regulation will be challenging to justify in contemporary culture. While this does not necessarily lead to a programme for

²⁴H. Sherwood, ‘C of E bishops’ compromise on same-sex marriage will not settle painful divisions’, *Guardian*, 19 January 2023, p. 5.

²⁵See, for example, Stephen Pattison, *The Faith of the Managers: When Management Becomes Religion* (London: Cassell, 1997); Gordon Oliver, *Ministry without Madness* (London: SPCK, 2012).

²⁶For some fuller discussion, see John Webster, ‘The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3.1 (2001), pp. 69–82; and Richard Roberts, ‘Lord, Bondsman and Churchman: Identity, Integrity and Power in Anglicanism’, in C. Gunton and D. Hardy (eds.), *On Being the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), pp. 156–224.

disestablishment, the external clamour for fewer ties between church and state are likely to grow – especially where only one denomination enjoys powers and privileges that are not shared by others. We note the current requirement of all English bishops, before taking up their episcopal ministry, to appear before the monarch and offer personal fealty to them and to take an oath of personal loyalty and obedience to the monarch. What does this say to other denominations and faiths, other than despite religious freedoms, inequality is divinely sanctioned?

The past is a foreign country. No monarch would now seek to rule and reign as Charles I had done, assuming the entitlements of divine right. Oddly, however, the vestiges of this live on in thin Laudian theologies of episcopacy. If the word and judgment of a bishop cannot be challenged by laity or synod, or subject to democratic accountability, the Church of England many have to choose between being a public-national church, and an increasingly untenable future with the powers and privileges vested through establishment.

Conclusion

There are two senses in which one can understand the term ‘self-emptying’ church. A genuinely kenotic ecclesiology will lead to a church that models the humility of Jesus, and pays little regard to itself. It will not ‘cling’ to its status, but empty itself, taking the form of a servant. It will feed the poor and shelter the homeless. It will put energy and resources into foodbanks and credit unions. It will pray and give, but not count the cost.

The other kind of ‘self-emptying’ church will fret about its size and following. It will embark upon endless recruitment drives. It will talk-up its status, boast about its increases, and be consumed by its own self-importance. It will constantly refrain mantras from its texts drawn from its ‘grammars of growth’, reciting them excitedly in sepulchred echo chambers.

John Robinson once opined that ‘the House of God’ is ‘primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor’s hut set up in the grounds’.²⁷ The church was only ever meant to be the Constructor’s Hut on God’s Building Site, which is the world. The church is not God’s primary preoccupation. The world is. Helping to bring about the Kingdom of God is Christian faith. Christians are not called to be devoted members of the *Church Preservation Society* (good work though such bodies undoubtedly do for heritage and spirituality).

For Christians, Jesus is the body language of God. He sees the unseen, hears the unheard, speaks for the mute and marginalized, touches the untouchable. The incarnation reconciled the gap between humanity and divinity. The incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus was rooted in kenosis and service. In Christ, there is no longer ‘social distance’ between us and God. God chose to dwell with us in Christ in order that we might be one with another and one with God. God accomplished this through the kenosis of Christ.

The first Christians modelled civil obedience and civic engagement alongside generous, indeed revolutionary, acts of social service and charity. They drew on the example of Jesus, and one of the earliest Christian doctrines – that of *kenosis*.

²⁷John Robinson, *The New Reformation* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 27.

The term *comes from the* Greek verb – *kenoun* – ‘to empty’, in Phil. 2.7, which says Christ ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a servant’. According to this doctrine, Jesus laid aside his kingly status: he did not cling to equality with God, but humbled himself. This was Jesus’ deliberate divesting of honour and privilege in order to embrace and embody full and authentic human solidarity.

Modelling the church on the self-emptying of Jesus is unlikely to win over many advocates among current ecclesial hierarchies. Nonetheless, I hope and pray for a new kind of humble, listening Church to emerge under the reign of Charles III. One that is openly grounded, unambiguously loving and attentive to all. One less absorbed by survival or growth, and more focused on national service. One less preoccupied with itself, and more fully occupied with the God who chose to live amongst us as a servant. One no longer self-fulfilling, but rather, in following Jesus, has divested itself of rank and privilege, and is self-emptying. This will be the church that follows the Servant King.