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Canterbury Cathedral, from the north-west

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HERBERT HENSLEY HENSON

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Hon. Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford

THE
CHURCH
OF
ENGLAND

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

A British traveller in the United States just after the Coronation was likely to be hard put to it to explain the Church of England even to himself. There is often no more difficult task than to justify what one takes for granted. The Jubilee, the Royal Wedding, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the Abdication, and above all the Coronation Ceremony in the Abbey—brought direct to the American by cinema or radio—had just served to make the entire American nation conscious of the “Established” Church of England. There were questions that I hesitated to answer through too *much* knowledge. But there were many more I parried through too *little*, concerning that institution which most of us unconsciously assume we know all about. But never did I so realize its anomalous and its paradoxical position, its superficial and yet its fundamental significance, until I had to put into understandable words my replies to that disarmingly direct and uncompromising cross-examination.

No description of England would convey much sense of reality without an account of its formative and sustaining institutions, and of those institutions the Established Church would come into the “short list” of any exponent. And yet the average man has but the sketchiest notions of the true position and characteristics of the Church. The respectable and prosperous intellectual classes, doing little or nothing to sustain her or revere her in everyday life, use her socially, and—through respectable scorn for the bare civil alternatives—in weddings and memorial services, with an occasional function of national or institutional significance. Yet in times of attack they are to be relied on to put her first and resent any belittlement of her claims.

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The Coronation Service woke up not America alone to the problem of "Church and State". One prominent public man in London exclaimed to me: "This has been a field day for the Church—well, I must say they've delivered the goods."

To the layman the character of the State nexus is not often in the forefront of his mind. An occasional flash of perception brings it all back. To me, one such was when we received the final news from the House of Commons about the Debate on the New Prayer Book, and my neighbour, the venerable Bishop Knox, stood on my doorstep, after his long leadership in the fight for his passionately held convictions, with the mien and the voice of an Old Testament Prophet, thanking God for this "deliverance". Another such flash was on a recent Easter Sunday when the fortuitous shuttle of holiday-making took a very high judicial dignitary indeed and myself to the same little Anglican Church in Cornwall, where, after a service outrageous by any ordinary standards, we met on the churchyard path, and he exclaimed—incensed in every sense of the word—"And what is this we have been at? Is it the Church of England by law established? *This ought to be stopped!*"; and I thought of the worthy Bishop—one time of a famous Nonconformist public school—to whom the responsibility might fall, and I did not envy him his job of "stopping it".

Of all our Institutions, this has the most need to be studied in its historic development if it is to be understood—a fact which this volume definitely recognizes.

This venerable Institution has two sides, the political and the religious. It has survived the deepest political vicissitudes and has been modified by them far less than by the internal change in its religious content, and all this notwithstanding the fact that it has kept its creed, liturgy and internal form of government almost unchanged for centuries. In one of its darkest hours, one

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William Stampe, D.D., “the imprisoned, plundered, exil’d Minister of God’s word at Stepney”, delivered his soul in sermons at the Hague, and sent them forth to his old flock after eight years’ absence (*A Treatise of Spiritual Infatuation*, 1650) and spoke of the Church of England as the establishment of religion in its purity and lustre, “that which should be most dear unto a nation”—it could “never have received so deepe a wound, from any Infernal Stratagem, as from the plausible pretensions of refining and securing it unto us. How well it is refined, and secured, yourselves may judge by the present Complexion of our Deare mother, strip’d and mangled and wounded unto death by the sonns of her owne bowells. Her Government dissolved; Her Feastes (the Religious Commemorations of the great mysteries of Salvation) abolished; Her Sacred formes of prayer (the sweet harmony, and agreement of harts, and voyces) vilified and scorned. . . . Her Champions (that should maintaine her Doctrine against the frauds and fallacies of her subtile and malicious adversaries) expelled, and banished the *Schooles of the Prophets*; Her doctrine. . . invaded and tramped into a muddie puddle; Her Discipline discharged and threatned. . . . Her Temples either defaced and demolished; or else locked up by the *Militarian Power*. In so much that in one of her Cities. . . namely Lincoln, the Sacramental Bread and Wine hath not been communicated for three years together. And the true Protestant Religion (which by solemn Protestation we were obliged to maintaine) is now squeezed into such a narrow roome, that few or none dare own the profession of it, unlesse it be upon the scaffold. . . .”

It is almost inconceivable that a Church could survive the subsequent disputations on government, discipline and relation to authority such as one may find through the myriad pages of Richard Baxter. (He indeed anticipated the modern idea of an alternative liturgy as a

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suitable means of accommodating a wide range of thought in a single communion.) But that strides the centuries.

No one could do justice to the Church of England as an institution unless he were in it and of it, deeply dyed. And yet not too much so. He would still not do justice, unless he had the objective faculty to stand outside and judge it, changing in history and political standing, as a social force—judge it dispassionately, fearlessly, without apology, but with pride. Few men could attempt this appraisal. The impressive performance of Bishop Henson—which it would be presumptuous of me to praise—is evidence that he is one of those few. Maybe his book will get him into trouble in some quarters. He has never minded trouble. But it will get him appreciation and gratitude in many others—and that too will never move him overmuch.

STAMP

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When I received from Lord (then Sir Josiah) Stamp a proposal that I should “consider writing the volume on the Church of England” in the series on “English Institutions”, which he had undertaken to edit for the Cambridge University Press, I felt it requisite to point out that, in view of my publicly stated conviction that recent events had rendered the Establishment morally indefensible, I might well be thought unfitted for the task to which he was good enough to invite me. However, after consulting the Syndics, he assured me that I might have an absolutely free hand. Accordingly I proceeded to prepare what I called a *Speculum Ecclesiae Anglicanae*, describing the actual working of the Church, and setting out my impressions and conclusions with respect to it. This book, then, is neither a history of the Church of England, nor a treatise on ecclesiastical law, but a “speculum” or mirror in which the working institution is displayed. Only so much history has been introduced, and so much law, as appeared in my judgment indispensable for a just estimate of the existing situation. It is obvious that the question of Disestablishment could not be wholly omitted, but it forms no part of the general scheme, and for the most part I have contented myself with indicating my own position, stating as fairly as I can the relevant facts, and leaving the reader to draw his own inferences.

Disestablishment has for the time being fallen out of practical politics. Partly, the public has ceased to concern itself with merely ecclesiastical questions; and, partly, the old reasons for objecting to the Establishment have ceased to be relevant. The victory of Democracy has removed the civil disabilities of non-Anglicans; such

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privileges as linger are neither greatly valued by their possessors, nor greatly resented by others. The severest critics of Establishment are now found within the membership of the Established Church. Moreover, the strange revolt against Christianity, which has swept over a great part of the continent, has created a natural reluctance in English minds to take any action which might have the appearance of hostility to Christianity. This sentiment is both intelligible and respect-worthy, and even though it be misdirected, is not likely to grow weaker. Its immediate effect is to provide a popular apology for the Establishment.

At the same time, it is apparent that the monstrous development of Erastianism in Totalitarian Germany has made a profound and painful impression in England. It has opened the eyes of many English Churchmen to the dangerous possibilities latent in Establishment, and inclined them to resent and resist claims on the part of the English State which, albeit in principle unwarranted, have in the past been readily conceded. Few considering English Churchmen to-day would endorse without large reserve Archbishop Tait's address on the constitution of the Church of England at the Lambeth Conference of 1878.¹

The Church of England is a national institution, but it is also a spiritual society, an organized branch of the Catholic or universal Christian Church. Its functioning as a national institution may, or may not, assist fulfilment of the higher obligations implicit in its spiritual character. Among these must be reckoned the maintenance of right relations with the other branches of the Christian society, and the faithful wardship of the Christian religion. Moreover, a living Church must take its due part in the evangelization of the non-Christian world. The efficiency of the national institution is finally

¹ *V. Life*, II, 369-370.

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conditioned by the healthy activity of the spiritual society. Some consideration of the Anglican "Via Media", and of the relations of the Church of England with other Christian Churches, could not be excluded from my plan, and I have allowed myself to discuss with some freedom the situation created by, or, perhaps, disclosed by, the recently published *Report* of the Archbishops' Committee on Doctrine in the Church of England. This *Report* has been generally recognized as a document of outstanding importance, and cannot be overlooked by any serious student of English religion. The authoritative character of the *Report*, the great ability and various outlook of its authors, and above all the high quality of the *Report* itself, combine to clothe it with exceptional interest and value. It will take rank with the Clerical Subscription Act (1865), the Appeal on Church Unity issued by the Lambeth Conference (1920), and the Revised Prayer Book (1928) as marking a stage in the advance of the Church of England out of an insular self-centredness into a genuinely Catholic mind.

It is apparent that a complete view of the Church of England would include much that has been perforce omitted, since inclusion would have enlarged the book excessively. Thus nothing has been said about the amazing multiplicity of organizations within the Church, designed to meet the needs of various sections of the community, a multiplicity which arouses anxiety in many minds which are neither ill-informed nor unsympathetic. Waste of resources, both financial and personal, dissipation of interest and energy, a certain lop-sidedness of religious emphasis, and an imperilling of ecclesiastical discipline are mischiefs which shadow all well-intentioned attempts to substitute private essays for corporate effort. The conditions under which "Societies", maintained by "voluntary contributions", can wisely be permitted within the Church, constitute a problem which is equally

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urgent, complicated, and important. It must soon engage the anxious attention of the Bishops.

One considerable omission, perhaps, needs explanation. I have left unconsidered the large and perplexing subject of the Ecclesiastical Courts. I did so deliberately, because the Ecclesiastical Courts have largely fallen out of use since the House of Commons, by rejecting the Prayer Book Measure (1928), threw the Church back into the anarchic confusion, which the Royal Commission (1906) described, and which the Revision of the Prayer Book was designed in some measure to remedy. The present situation is confessedly undignified, unreasonable, and unstable. The Bishops are attempting to govern the Church, apart from the law, by such authority as their episcopal office can command. Their hold on the clergy is measured by the extent of deference which the clergy may feel conscientiously bound to accord to their oath of canonical obedience. It is understood that, apart from moral offences which affront the general conscience, and which are happily very infrequent, the parochial incumbents need fear no coercive discipline, however freely they may break the law which controls the conduct of public worship. The clerical conscience, assisted by the fatherly advice of the Bishops, is to serve as an alternative to the Act of Uniformity, enforced by the Courts. Such a situation cannot be either satisfactory or secure.

When the English nation is again free to interest itself in its domestic concerns, and again gives attention to the working of the Established Church, it is certain that the issue of Disestablishment will once more present itself. It is not likely that its settlement will again be postponed.

H. HENSLEY HENSON
Bishop

July, 1939