

Church and State: The Need for Separation

DAVID Cameron recently reiterated his view that “Britain is a Christian country”. Of course, he is correct in the constitutional sense. There is an established church in Britain. Its monarch is Head of this church and its bishops sit in the House of Lords, making it the only country outside Iran to have unelected clerics in the legislature (this religious lobby will probably kill off Lord Falconer’s Assisted Dying Bill in June). No Catholic or atheist can be a monarch (just as there has never been a Catholic or avowed atheist Prime Minister). About a third of schools are under religious control and all state schools are obliged to have a daily act of ‘collective worship’.

None of this truly reflects the state of the society. The International Gallup poll finds the UK among the least religious. 59% say they are ‘Christian’, but most see it as a question of culture rather than belief. Asked by YouGov whether they were religious, 29% said yes and 65% said no. At least a quarter of Britons now openly declare that they do not believe in a God. Moreover, the number of non-Christian believers is rising: one in 20 Britons is Muslim and nearly a million are Hindus.

NORTHERN Ireland, as part of the UK, is also constitutionally religious. But it also has a devolved government, dominated by religious politicians. Indeed, the fact that it is part of the ‘officially’ Christian British state enables these politicians to persist in enforcing even stricter religious laws. Thus Northern Ireland is the only area of the UK where abortion, gay marriage and gay blood donations are prohibited. On the Protestant side, most politicians strongly oppose Sunday sport and refuse to do political negotiations on a Sunday. But not only do they oppose these things themselves; they will, if they can, impose their opposition to them on everyone else. They tend to take a more censorious attitude to pornography and art which is perceived to ridicule Christianity, as the recent controversy over *The Bible: The Complete Word of God (Abridged)* indicates.

Again, the reality on the ground is different. The 2011 Census results show 1 in 10 are not religious and old identities are being thrown off as over 1 in 5 declare themselves as Northern Irish, rejecting the traditional ‘two community’ stereotypes, suggesting the border issue is not as important as living together. Those with No Religion are now a well-defined group of almost 200,000 people. To this might be added a further 5.7% who did not state their religion. The idea of ‘the four main churches’ being a legitimate voice without including a No Religion voice is shown to be a media fiction. Only Catholics and Presbyterians are larger groups than those who apparently have no religion. Since only 5.6% were brought up in non-religious households, at least 100,000 people now alive in NI have shed their religious baggage. Moreover, opinion polls clearly indicate that a large majority have a more liberal and tolerant attitude to abortion and gay rights.

They also insist on the need for integrated schools. Clearly, the people are well ahead of the politicians and the law, and this progressiveness is even more apparent in

the young, as reflected in a recent *Belfast Telegraph* survey.

THE Irish Republic has a written constitution which is permeated with Christian, specifically Catholic, references, even though the infamous article 44 has long gone. It still begins, “In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority”, and then refers to “our obligations to our divine Lord Jesus Christ”. It then makes the President, judges and other public office holders swear a religious oath. Blasphemy was recently made a criminal offence. The public airways play the Angelus, a Catholic prayer. Most primary and secondary schools and a large number of hospitals are still managed by the Catholic clergy. Many of them have a distinctly Catholic ethos, emphasised by the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar. Again, the reality is more diverse. An increasing percentage are non-religious and have a tolerant and liberal outlook, and the state itself is belatedly acknowledging this fact. The planned referendum on same sex marriage is testimony to this progress.

These three regions contain citizens of many beliefs and no beliefs. The public sphere should not promote one faith in such diverse and pluralist surroundings. People have every right to believe what they wish and to celebrate their beliefs in their home and places of worship, but they have no right to special privileges in law and to impose their beliefs on everybody. Ireland should be an abject lesson in the dangers of such a theocracy. For decades there was a Southern Catholic state and a Northern Protestant state, and both operated to the detriment of people who did not belong to the dominant faith.

When he referred to ‘building a wall of separation between church and state’, Thomas Jefferson saw it as a protection of freedom of religion as much as a guarantee of rights to the non-religious, for it meant that no one particular faith could impose its will on all the others. Christians North and South should appreciate this truth. □