

## Church and Constitution

The 2016 referendum ushered in a period of exceptional political turmoil in the UK. It was of a magnitude and intensity unknown at least since World War Two, and included three separate Parliamentary issues taken for decision to the Supreme Court. One unhappy result was a widespread loss of confidence in the efficacy of our democratic structures. Whilst the particular issue of BREXIT is at least partly solved, this has not alleviated the serious doubts about our political arrangements, and it is possible that changes at constitutional level will be forthcoming.

If that were to be the case, what role would or should be exercised by the Church of England? Has secularism become so dominant in the UK that the answer is virtually nothing?

In distant times there would have been no doubt. When vital steps towards freedom and justice in England were obtained through Magna Carta, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, was closely involved in the negotiations, and the Church in England subsequently played an important part in the communication of the Charter to the people. Crucially, as a theologian, the Archbishop based his actions in support of the Charter on his own interpretation of Biblical teaching.

(As an aside, this put the Church in England at serious odds with Rome, several centuries before the Reformation.)

Although times are very different, the lesson from the past is very clear. If constitutional change is brought about as a consequence of the recent turmoil, the Church of England will need to develop a theology of democracy if it is to have a significant part to play. This will not be easy, but the unsatisfactory alternative would see the political world struggling to put its own deliberations into some kind of a secular moral framework. The chances of finding common ground in such a process would not be high.

Perhaps none of this is going to happen in the near future, but nevertheless I would suggest that there is a strong case for liberal Christian theologians to explore the possibilities. Wisely, the Church of England took no stance on the BREXIT issue itself, but a change to the nature of Parliamentary democracy is another matter. Although these comments do not extend to a theological exploration in itself, it would be appropriate to finish by noting that, although freedom and justice are not necessarily linked to an effective democracy, in practice they struggle to survive without it.

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